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Present and Future of Biblical Studies

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Edited by

Tat-siong Benny Liew



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In memory of Lynne St. Clair Darden, whose presence will be missed but whose voice through her work will live on in the future.



Contents

List of Contributors IX

Introduction: Nostalgic for a Future 1

Tat-siong Benny Liew

PART 1

Questions of Time and History

An Essay on Method 15

Roland Boer

Grammars of Sacrifice: Futures, Subjunctives, and What Would Have/Could Have Happened on Mount Moriah 33

Yvonne Sherwood

Curational Reflections: On Rhetorics of Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Scholarship 68

Davina C. Lopez

Contemporary (Analog) Tensions and Digital Futures 93

Jay Twomey

Certeau and the Two Ways: Digital Dissolution and the Demands of Power in Biblical Studies 112

Yii-Jan Lin

PART 2

Questions of Time, Place, and Planet

No Future for Biblical Studies? Or, Still Living with a Contingent Apocalypse as *Biblical Interpretation* Turns 25 133

Jacqueline M. Hidalgo

Postcolonializing the Bible with a Little Help from Derek Walcott 156

Steed Vernyl Davidson

Erasures and *Dysplacements*: The “Belly-Myther” of Endor and Biblical Studies from Canada in Light of the TRC 182

Fiona C. Black

The Power of Canonised Motifs: The Chance for Biblical Studies in a Secular, Canonically Illiterate World? 216

Jorunn Økland

African Biblical Scholarship as Post-Colonial, Tri-Polar, and a Site-of-Struggle 240

Gerald O. West

Those Incommensurate Activities We Call “Biblical Studies”: A Future-Oriented History of Their Bifurcated Present 274

Stephen D. Moore

“Staying with the Trouble”: Climates of Change in Biblical Studies 297

Ken Stone

Index of Authors 321

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Introduction: Nostalgic for a Future

Tat-siong Benny Liew

In 2017, the journal *Biblical Interpretation* turned 25. As the Executive Editor of the journal since 2012, I thought it would be good to mark and celebrate this occasion with a collection of essays on the discipline's "present and future," though I must admit that I had no idea at the time what this collection would look like or what the invited contributors would say.

As I read these essays to prepare for this collection's publication, I kept being taken back in my head to a book by the late Svetlana Boym. While talks of future are more likely to be associated with words such as utopia or, especially for biblical scholars, apocalyptic, and a word like nostalgia is generally linked with the past, Boym's book carries the provocative and seemingly oxymoronic title, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Boym 2001). By that title, Boym means to assert that nostalgia is far from being a thing of the past or about the past. In addition to suggesting that nostalgia does not and will not end with the arrival of nano speed, cyber capacity, and, supposedly, a borderless world (since rapid changes and advanced marketing actually caused us to realize how quickly we might lose what we have, even what we thought could not be lost), Boym also helpfully explains that nostalgia is arguably less about the past than about challenging the modern understanding of time as linear and irreversible. In other words, it involves a sense of time being jumbled, entangled, and intertwined rather than a straight time arrow pointing backwards. Nostalgia can be both prospective and retrospective, including past potentials that never got realized or visions for the future that have become obsolete; as such, nostalgia can be "a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym 2001: xiii). Nostalgia, therefore, is not always judicious, but it can be—better?—understood as both a persisting sentiment and a desire to unsettle modern temporal logic of history and progress. It is a longing for a "better" time and a "better" understanding of time. A nostalgic, as Boym puts it, is one who "feels stifled within the conventional confines" of the present (Boym 2001: xiv). It signifies a dissatisfaction with the present, an anxiety about the future, as well as a desire for a different future.

Incidentally but perhaps not accidentally, essays in this collection also recognize today's digital realities (Lin; Lopez; Twomey) but, at the same time, struggle with various logics of a Eurocentric modernity that have impacted biblical studies (Black; Davidson; Lin; Sherwood; West) and express skepticism about our discipline's future because of job prospects (Hidalgo; Lin), biblical illiteracy in the larger culture (Lopez; Økland), or current political climate

(Stone). Roland Boer's and Davina Lopez's essay in particular—given the way they, respectively, feature the issue of anachronism as a central disciplinary problematic and question the apparent contrast between “outdated” and “innovative” approaches in our field—brings to the fore how biblical studies assumes temporal linearity, irreversibility, and progress. Yvonne Sherwood's contribution is arguably most explicitly nostalgic—in Boym's understanding of the term—with its focused look back at some past and, for most, long forgotten Christian texts about Abraham's offering of Isaac; its view of the *akedah* as having a “long history of longing”; and its reference to past futures. Also related to this temporal question is Steed Davidson's and Gerald West's query in their respective contribution on whether history can be compartmentalized in the past and if time is not better understood as “entangled,” jumbled, or multiple.¹ Jacqueline Hidalgo also questions if talks of future, including the talk of children and the next generation, imply Christian concepts of previous fall, disruptive present, and promised redemption. Many contributors also make a deliberate and explicit turn to look back into our discipline's pasts as a way to think about its present and the future (Black; Davidson; Lopez; Moore; Økland; Twomey).

Turning, then, Boym's tantalizing turn of phrase into “nostalgic for a future,” I want to share briefly my own reflections on what I found in this collection. While I will allude to various essays within the collection in what follows, I will not be summarizing the contents or main arguments of each; each of the contribution really needs to be read and engaged on its own terms.

Guild is Not a Home

The word nostalgia, as is well known and as Boym points out (2001: xiii), is made up of two Greek words that mean, respectively, “homecoming” (νόστος) and “pain” or “longing” (ἄλγος). Νόστος or “homecoming” is, of course, a major theme of *The Odyssey*, which Jorunn Økland discusses at length in association with the refugee situations in Europe in her essay within this collection. While

1 Relevant to this conversation is Michel Foucault's understanding of genealogy and of how genealogy may open up a countermemory that transforms history “into a totally different form of time” (Foucault 1977: 160). Since Dipesh Chakrabarty's work is referenced by both Davidson and Ken Stone and both Davidson and Stone have something to say about the economy, see also Chakrabarty's distinction between what he calls “History 1” and “History 2” in Chakrabarty 2000; while both “History 1” and “History 2” are impacted by the logic of capital, Chakrabarty characterizes “History 2” with an unruly excess that capital cannot control.

Steed Davidson riles in his essay against the colonial nostalgia for some sort of imagined purity among the colonized through Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (which partly adapts and resituates Homer's *Odyssey* in St. Lucia), Fiona Black also uses terms like *dysplacement* and *solistalgia* in hers to talk about the painful experience of indigenous people, including the medium at Endor in 1 Samuel 28, being and feeling dispossessed in their own land. Besides these specific references to corporeal dislocations from physical homes or actual uses of the word nostalgia, however, many of the essays convey a general sense of discontent or discomfort with the current state of the discipline, whether that has to do with its understanding and use of history (Davidson; Lin); its own colonial associations and gatekeeping dynamics (Black); its Christian imperialism or biblio-centrism if not biblicism (Black; Davidson; Hidalgo; Stone); its anthropocentrism that, at the same time, disregards the entire human body and affects (Black; Hidalgo; Stone); its "methodolatry" (Black; Stone); its parochial tendencies and hence inability to speak across disciplines (Black; Moore; Stone), attend to voices beyond those of the North Atlantic (Black; Hidalgo; Moore; West); reach beyond the academy (Black; Økland), recognize Marxist contributions (Boer), or address contemporary challenges (Black; Moore; Økland; Stone). As Boym indicates, nostalgia's object of longing is not necessarily a place but a sense of intimacy, a feeling of being at home, or an emotional "at-home-ness," so nostalgia can be "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2011: xiii, 251). If so, what I sense in many of these essays is a longing to belong, or a home in the guild of biblical studies. That is to say, while contributors to this volume are all card-carrying biblical scholars, they do not necessarily feel at home in the discipline of biblical studies at the present moment.

Sigmund Freud is, of course, known for his exploration and complication of the meaning of *heimlich* ("home"), so what one assumes to be familiar and homey can turn out to be unfamiliar, uncanny (*unheimlich*), and haunting (Freud 1953–74: 17.219–52). Avery Gordon has suggested haunting may have something to do with opportunities that we have buried, missed, or lost in the past (Gordon 2008). Although Sherwood does not mention Gordon's work, her own turn or return in her contribution to look at some of the better known ancient Jewish texts and some of the long forgotten Christian texts in Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Middle English about the *akedah* suggests precisely that pre-modern readings of the Bible may open up multiple possibilities that much modern biblical scholarship, with its emphasis on linearity and singularity, has foreclosed. One can see the *unheimlich* even in the essay by Jay Twomey, who begins his essay for this collection by stating that he found more of a home in biblical studies than in the field of English or comparative literature, and then identifying *Biblical Interpretation* as a kind of home base for him in

biblical studies. In his study of the digital archive containing all the published essays in *Biblical Interpretation* that have to do with Paul from the last 25 years, Twomey finds out, to his surprise, that the line between historical-critical and contemporary approaches is not necessarily as rigid or as solid as he has previously assumed. Yii-Jan Lin, Davina Lopez, and Steed Davidson also comment on the similarities between these two camps in their respective contribution to this collection, while Gerald West suggests that there may still be significant benefits to be gleaned from previous historical-critical scholarship. I will return to their comments in the next section of this introduction; for now, let me simply suggest that the two-world bifurcation narrated by Stephen Moore in this volume—in terms of both method and geography—seems to have created ghosts right within *Biblical Interpretation's* digital archive, where a spectral presence of historical questions or historicist sentiments awaits Twomey. Twomey is confronted by something unhomey and unfamiliar to him in what he thought to be a home in his home in biblical studies. For our contributors, having membership in the guild, being “housed” in the discipline, or even locating a methodological home within the field does not necessarily mean having a feeling of being home.

Syntax without a Plot

What does one do with this sense of intellectual or academic homelessness, whether that is because of disciplinary boundary, methodological division, ivory-tower mentality of the academy, geopolitical power differential, or racial/ethnic difference? According to Boym, it will drive people “to tell their story, to narrate” (Boym 2001: 50). We have of course also learned from Paul Ricoeur—through his three-volume work that was published over a span of four years (Ricoeur 1984–88)—that time and narrative are intricately bound. Nostalgia then is not only about time, space, and a sense of distance or defamiliarization but also narration of stories. Moore's essay in this volume is perhaps most explicit in its adoption of a storytelling mode, while Black also presents her reading of 1 Samuel 28 as a story about “who belongs and how they belong.” Regardless of mode of writing, what kinds of stories are being told in this volume?

To tell their stories, many contributors to this volume, as I have already mentioned, look back in order to look forth. While Moore narrates a story of disciplinary bifurcation in terms of both approach (historical and contextual) and geography (Global North and Global South), others suggest that similarities, shared assumptions, or potentially beneficial exchanges exist between

historical criticism and other interpretive practices. While Twomey sees conversations between these two broadly defined methodological camps as not only feasible but also favorable after his study of *Biblical Interpretation's* digital archive, he does not offer any specifics on how historical criticism may be helpful to his own work. West's essay fills this lacuna by referring to Itumeleng Mosala's arguments *back in the 1980s*. Mosala uses his training as a historical-critical critic to argue that the biblical texts themselves are "sites of struggles." As we know, historical-critical studies see the final form of a biblical text as results of redaction; what Mosala suggests is that these redactional or editorial hands belonged to the powerful winners of past struggles, but redacted or edited texts mean that they still contain traces and voices of the subjugated. For West, then, the historical-critical methods, at least in the ways that they are used by Mosala, are helpful because their emphasis on diachronic textual histories not only can help explain how the Bible could be a tool to facilitate the colonization of South Africa, but also has the potential to prevent South Africans from accepting and duplicating the oppressive ideologies of the Bible in its current form.

Likewise, Lopez affirms the value of continuing employment of historical criticism. She also takes a further step to argue that practices of biblical studies, historical criticism or not, are all curatorial in nature, since curation is all about making meaning through a process of arrangement, display, and narration. Using the language of taxonomy, archive, and grand narratives, Lin contends that digital technologies have exposed historiography as construction rather than as "discovery," as contextual to current rather than to ancient milieu, and as a valuable game of meaning rather than as a slow but sure progress towards "truth."² Linking the discipline's long-standing emphasis on history with concerns with the present and not the past (see also Økland's similar point in her essay about how practices of biblical studies are "fueled"), Lin disputes in effect Moore's narration that contextual biblical hermeneutics entered the scene in the Global North only in the 1990s.³ In fact, when Lin talks about historiography as a game, it is hard to know if she is not including other disciplinary

2 Lin's view of historiography as a game reminds me of Friedrich Nietzsche's reflection of culture and *Weltanschauung* historicism as a game; see Levine 1995: 57–62.

3 Lopez's point about Ezra Pound's connection with Chinese literature in the last century may also dispute Moore's two-world division. After all, those in the Global North have often look to the Global South for inspiration and appropriation. See, for example, Wolin 2012 regarding how some prominent French intellectuals (including Jean-Paul Sartre, Julia Kristeva, and Foucault) turned enthusiastically to Maoism in China for such purposes in the 1960s.

practices within biblical studies, especially given her view of knowledge as being constructed and not discovered.

While Lopez deconstructs the oft-assumed disciplinary divide as a positive gesture to affirm the value of historical criticism and Lin does so as a neutral one since everything is a game (though a meaningful one), Davidson views historical critics and postcolonial critics as sharing the same *problematic* assumption of history. Like West, Davidson proposes a more complicated and circuitous conception of history and time; unlike West, Davidson does not propose a “back-to-the-future” move through the use of the historical-critical methods. Instead, he seeks to use Walcott’s allusions to the Genesis story in *Omeros* to detect new moves or elements to “postcolonialize” the Bible. Like Davidson, Økland’s essay also looks at a contemporary writer who alludes to the Bible (Karl Ove Knausgård of Norway), but Økland is more concerned about how biblical studies may help equip or enable writers like Knausgård with historical knowledge and background information about the Bible. How does one make sense of these simultaneous distances and connections among these contributions?

In her interrogation of nostalgia, Boym distinguishes between what she calls a “restorative nostalgia,” which focuses on νόστος and hence the reconstruction of the lost home, and a “reflective nostalgia,” which dwells on ἄλγος and thus the longing and the distance (Boym 2001: xviii, 41–55). Her typology is also reflected in the writing of a twelfth-century monk—Hugo of St. Victor—that Edward Said quotes towards the end of his well-known article, “Reflections on Exile” (Said 2000). Hugo wrote elegantly (albeit not in inclusive language):

It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.

SAID 2000: 185

One can see in Hugo’s writing about homeland or home, therefore, also this contrast between having a single fixation and forever deferring any kind of final arrival. Of course, people who are literally without a home—such as the landless indigenous people and the homeless refugees that Black and Økland discuss, respectively—may not feel or see themselves or their situation as “perfect”

as Hugo portrays. Given the connection Boym makes between nostalgia and narrative, however, it is not at all surprising that Boym also describes reflective nostalgia as having “a certain syntax (as well as a common intonation), but no single plot” (Boym 2001: 53).

I find Boym’s distinction between syntax and plot an apt description of this collection of essays as a whole. As one sees from my discussion above about what different contributors say about historical criticism, there are a lot of overlaps and connections; there is, however, no consensus in terms of what one should do with it. While West points to a strategic use of the historical-critical methods within a Marxist framework, Lopez refers to curation to warn against a hierarchical valuation of different approaches to biblical studies (especially the problem of denigrating historical criticism as “obsolete”), Lin urges the entire discipline (especially those interested in and committed to historiography) to be honest about what it is and does—as game—without dismissing its value, Davidson asks postcolonial critics to change its view and use of history to further “postcolonize” the Bible, and Økland sees the existing knowledge biblical scholars have about biblical history as potentially helpful to literary writers and the task of Bible translation. If I may go back to West, even though Davidson shares with him that time and history must be rethought from the perspectives of the colonized, Davidson’s thoughts on postcolonializing the Bible do not seem to involve at all the historical-critical methods, which West considers to be strategically useful. There is related rhetoric and much prodding, but there is no shared plot or singular teleological end. What we do know is, as Sherwood’s contribution shows, the past is by no means dead.

Since time and space (home) fold into each other in nostalgia (Boym 2001: 50), let’s turn to how contributors also bring up place or geography in this collection in ways that overlap but do not cohere. The essays by both Davidson and West are geographically specific (Davidson on the Caribbean and West South Africa); while Hidalgo explicitly names “respect” of context as important to biblical studies, her essay, at least in my reading, may well imply that both Davidson and West are still stuck in what Hidalgo considers as an orientation of “textual-fetishization.” Scrutinizing the biblical texts as “sites of struggles” to recover submerged voices through those same texts (West) does not really challenge the centrality of those texts; neither does learning from Walcott’s reading and writing of the Bible as an avenue to “postcolonialize” our reading of the Bible (Davidson).⁴ There are two more essays that are also more geographically

4 Citing Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Hidalgo also talks about the Bible as “a site of struggle,” but Hidalgo does so to signify a need to move beyond “biblical domination” to other texts besides the Bible.

specific, and they actually emphasize displacement, though that emphasis is on displacement of people and not, as Hidalgo proposes, displacement of the Bible. Økland's idea about learning how Syrian refugees in Greece may read the sea journeys and forced migration in the Bible remains very much focused on the reading of the biblical texts. The same is true of Black's desire to come up with an experimental reading strategy to help make space for indigenous people in Canada; her experimental strategy is for reading *the Bible*. There is, of course, a marked difference also between Økland, who wonders how refugees themselves might read the Bible, and Black, who performs herself a "non-indigenous" reading of 1 Samuel 28 (although both of them also talk about the importance of reception studies in our field).⁵ Black reads 1 Samuel 28 with the hope to tell a different story than the one she finds in the Bible to make space for indigenous people in Canada—what she calls an "otherstory" within the biblical text—but she does so without resorting to, as West suggests, the historical-critical methods. Black's reading, as she shows in her essay, is also informed in no small part by Laura Donaldson's reading of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. The title of King's novel points to yet another geographically specific essay: Stone's essay, concerned with multispecies ecological health, is clearly located in the United States with its detailed reference in its beginning to the implications of Donald J. Trump's presidency. While Black gives a simple nod to inter-species potentials in her discussion of Donaldson's reading of King, Stone, like Black, reads a biblical text (the story of Noah) with a brief mention of a contemporary rendition or reading of the same text by a non-biblical scholar (Darren Aronofsky's 2014 film, *Noah*). Is it accurate for me to suggest, then, that Black's and Stone's moves—reading the Bible through or alongside a contemporary novel or movie—are similar to what Davidson has in mind in his reading of Walcott's *Omeros* in his hope to detect ways to "post-colonialize" the Bible, though Davidson himself stops short of performing any reading of a biblical text in his essay?⁶

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- 5 Boym suggests that people who have themselves experienced displacement and exile tell the best stories of nostalgia because they also know the limits of nostalgia and hence they also challenge nostalgia in their nostalgia. Having said that, Boym also cautions how their stories are often used by others in safer and more privileged places for the latter's own projections. See Boym 2007: 16. Having both Økland's essay about refugees and Black's about indigenous peoples in this volume does help bring up an interesting and important question regarding how racialized and minoritized groups and indigenous peoples may fair *differently* in oppressive systems and colonial societies. For one provocative take on this subject in the North American context, see Day 2016.
- 6 Since Davidson discusses Walcott's allusion to the Garden of Eden and Stone not only connects the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch (and hence the roots of our ecological crisis)

There is, however, more. Using the vocabulary of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Stone sees his reading of Noah as “reparative” rather than “paranoid” because Stone performs a reading to suggest that this story in Genesis not only affirms the life and value of multispecies but also acknowledges human responsibilities for the loss of animal lives. Despite the similarities I have pointed out between Black’s essay and Stone’s, Black sees her reading—an “otherstory”—not as a reparative reading but a third way that breaks the “keep-or-reject-the-text binary.” Hidalgo does mention Sedgwick’s “paranoid” and “reparative” readings, but only to suggest (in ways similar to what Davidson says about the use of history by both historical and postcolonial biblical scholars) that both readings involve the *problematic* assumptions of “unveiling” to decode or expose what is “real.”

If nostalgia is about entangled time as well as related to narrative, what we find in this volume are some rather entangled narratives about biblical studies, whether it is about historical criticism or about the place of the Bible. There is no convincing plot to carry us forward in the development of biblical studies from the present. Allow me to just give one more illustration of this.

Since Boym suggests that nostalgia is seldom straightforward but will make one look sideways and take one down detours, let me begin this third and last illustration by going back to Black’s essay. Black also talks about Saul taking a detour to see the medium at Endor; the purpose of Saul’s detour is, of course, to visit someone from his past who has actually passed away (Samuel) to get some information about Saul’s own future. Relating this reading to the situation of the indigenous First Peoples of Canada, Black talks about their material losses and sees the investigation of contemporary colonialism’s material effects as a potentially fruitful *future* endeavor.⁷ Given Boym’s expertise in Slavic

back to the emergence of “Mesopotamian agriculture” but also mentions Genesis 2–3, I cannot help but remember, especially in light of their respective use of Walcott and Aronofsky, Daniel Quinn’s reading of the early chapters of Genesis as stories being told by “the takers.” “Takers” for Quinn are agriculturalists who, having convinced themselves that they know good and evil, gradually took over all the land for agriculture, destroyed other ways of life (such as those of the hunters, the herders, and the pastorals), and are now threatening the existence of everyone and everything because of their excessive desire to expand. Interestingly, Quinn also suggests, in a manner similar to West, that these stories told by the agriculturalists had their origins from “the leavers” (or non-agriculturalists); just as “the takers” take over the land of “the leavers,” they also took over their stories for their own purposes. See Quinn 1992: 151–84.

- 7 This is understandable given Black’s pervasive reference to Coulthard 2014. Although Black does not mention this in her essay, Coulthard’s most publicized pronouncement in that book is this: “For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die” (Coulthard 2014: 173).

languages and literature, it is not surprising that she devotes quite a number of pages in her book to economic nostalgia and material issues related to the Soviet and Russia through Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism. While Black mentions material effects for the future and without the mention of Marx, Boer adopts a Marxist approach to undergird his current interpretive moves because he thinks that such an approach is best in not only addressing the inevitable concerns over temporal difference in biblical interpretation but also affording diversity in the discipline's postcolonial future without a "liberal" notion of freedom or of choice that is often predicated on exclusion. Many will want to engage Boer on his daring pronouncement, but my goal here is simply to register again how readers will find in this volume certain syntax but not a plot. After all, material concerns are far from absent in this volume, though Marxism is not necessarily articulated as a framework to consider—not to mention address—these concerns. As I have already mentioned, contributors make direct and explicit references to declining job prospects (Hidalgo; Lin). Davidson also discusses tourism in his reading of Walcott as involving an "unequal economic structure" connected with colonialism and raises questions of ecological protection. Similarly, Stone's essay about "climate (of) change" and multispecies ecological concern, while mentioning through Donna Haraway's scholarship how ecological challenges are interwoven or intersected with "imperialism, capitalism, racism, and gender injustices" as well as how our response as biblical scholars should involve interdisciplinarity, contains no real engagement with Marxism; in fact, Stone seems to prefer and defend the continuation of the term "Anthropocene" over the alternative term "Capitalocene" by way of Chakrabarty's work. Moore also highlights the ecological crisis at the end of his telling of the discipline's (hi)story as one of two "megaproblems" for both the Global North and the Global South; the other "megaproblem" is neocolonialism, which Moore links with globalization but without connecting either neocolonialism or globalization with capitalism. There are links and there are connections, but there is no single, definitive, and known goal or "home" to restore or in store. The nostalgia or the longing one finds in this volume is, to use Boym's vocabulary and category, reflective but not restorative.

Conclusion

In a sense, biblical studies is nostalgic by definition; one must traverse time and space to study these ancient texts that have been circulated over time and space for centuries. Contributors to this volume look backwards and sideways

to tell intertwined but different nostalgic stories about the future of biblical studies. Of course, a different lineup of scholars may well tell an entirely different set of stories, perhaps even a restorative set that contains a single plot. Apocalyptic thinking, as Hidalgo points out, is the conviction that one has been given the secret to unveil “*the real*” or the teleological end. I do not believe that this collection, taken as a whole, communicates that kind of sentiment or thinking. In many ways, the traditional academic hope for a linear disciplinary development and formation is frustrated here. What we find in this volume about the present and future of biblical studies is admittedly inverted, ironic, incoherent, and inconclusive. The persistent longing found in this collection may be closer to Foucault’s heterotopia, namely, an imperfect place in which different sites and (in)sights “are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1986: 24). However, as Boym points out, that is the nature of reflective nostalgia. Its point is not to hit a home run or to get one “home,” but, with deferral of linear time and through reflection, to find new and greater flexibility to open up multiple potentials for the future, including potentials—as Black, Lopez, Sherwood, Stone, Twomey, West and others suggest—that might have existed but are forgotten from the past. I would further add that stories about the present and future of biblical stories are necessarily fragmentary and incomplete, because change is endemic to not only academic disciplines but also life. Sooner or later, the unhomey will show up in what at first appears homey. Perhaps being nostalgic for the future in biblical studies is finally not about a particular time, place, approach, or issue, but to keep raising and asking questions of our disciplinary assumptions and practices.⁸

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PART 1

Questions of Time and History



An Essay on Method

Roland Boer

This is a purely theoretical intervention, focusing on the question of textual interpretation. Not only theoretical, it is also an unashamedly reflexive essay, which seeks to clarify and systematise what I actually do when I interpret texts. Ultimately, the exercise of interpretation operates by means of hunches that one then seeks to justify, either by means of a theoretical elaboration as I do here, or by means of a reading of the text that attempts to back up those hunches. What follows is an effort to provide some systematic coherence to the way my own hunches work. Such hunches are often triggered by a curious moment in a text, one that makes me pause and look away, allowing a train of thought to run its course. Then I return to the text with those stray thoughts in mind, waiting for yet another trigger to send my mind running. But hunches are not sufficient as a method, so I seek to verify these hunches by means of rigorous analysis. The following four points comprise the key elements of that analysis.

They may be summarised as follows. The first sets the scene, arguing that methods are triggered by efforts to deal with the anomalies produced and presented by texts. These methods include allegory; historical arguments concerning putative sources; poststructuralist solutions; questions of gender, ethnicity and sexuality; Marxist approaches; and so on. For the remaining aspects of the method preferred here, I draw on Marxist-inspired approaches, since they provide greater sophistication and enable different voices to speak. Thus, in the second point I seek to be methodologically explicit about the inevitable anachronism of any method we may use, especially with regard to ancient texts. Instead of throwing up our hands in despair or simply ignoring the problem, I suggest that a viable method needs to incorporate that necessary anachronism within the method itself by means of a narrative of difference. Third, against the assumption that texts reflect their contexts or that they express political and ideological agendas of their putative authors, this approach sees texts as metaphorically complex, unexpected and dialectical responses that attempt to overcome real political and economic contradictions. Finally, I seek to be explicit concerning the axiological moment of interpretation. In my approach, that moment engages in the practice of ideological suspicion, albeit with a particular emphasis. This is what may be called discernment, drawing from the initial sense of critical (*κριτικός*) as a need to discern what is beneficial and what is detrimental in any reading of a text. In the end, this

structured formulation is an attempt to systematise the way I explicate certain hunches that arise when first reading a text. The following begins by situating this method in light of the anomaly, from which I explain the reasons for opting for a Marxist-inspired approach.

Anomaly

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the one from the slave was born according to the flesh, the one from the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory (αλληγορούμενα): these women are two covenants.

GAL. 4:22–24

I suggest that the problem of the anomaly underlies most, if not all, of the bewildering array of methods and interpretations of texts. The anomaly is, obviously, what does not fit into a text in any known manner, what causes a disturbance in the narrative or poetic scheme. Let me use the example of biblical interpretation. The great precursors to modern biblical criticism, the medieval allegorists, took the anomaly in one direction, passing through the figure of Christ, into the inner life of the believer, and then out into the realm of universal history: the well-known literal (or historical), allegorical (or typological), moral (or tropological) and anagogic levels of interpretation.¹ The allegorists seized upon one textual anomaly after another; these anomalies then became the keys that unlocked whole new vistas of meaning. The anomaly in question may be a hitch in the story-line, a word out of place, or perhaps a syntactical blip, but it is the crucial signal that a deeper meaning lay hidden. The possible examples are myriad, such as the interpretation of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt as allegories of the life of Christ who moves from death to life, of the individual believer who passes from sin to salvation, and of the

1 As Honorius of Autun put it: “Sacred Scripture is interpreted and understood in four ways: historically, allegorically, tropologically, anagogically. This is expressed by the table for the presentation of bread in the ark (Exod. 25:29ff.), which is supported by four feet. The ark represents the Church, in which service is rendered to Christ. The table is sacred Scripture, upon which bread is presented, that is, the food of souls. The four feet are the four kinds of meaning, that is to say: history when the thing referred to is narrated as it happened; allegory, when the thing referred to is expounded with reference to Christ and the Church; tropology, when it is applied to soul and spirit; anagogy, when it is understood of the celestial life” (Norris 2003: xix).

people of God who are on the path to heaven from this vale of tears. Or the spiritual and ecclesiological interpretations of the Song of Songs as an allegory of Christ's love for Israel, the Church, or the individual believer, down to the breasts mentioned in Song 4:5 functioning as an allegory for the Old and New Testaments (Norris 2003). Or the interpretation of Jonah and the "big fish," in which every moment of Jonah's life becomes a signal of a comparable one in Jesus's life (Sherwood 2000: 11–21). From here, Jonah and the great fish also become an allegory for the life of the individual believer, who was once dead in sin but through Christ has a new life. Interpretation then moves onto the grand scheme of history, where Jonah's time of submarine transport (or at times the ship itself) becomes a sign of the collective of the faithful who, after the history of life on earth, enter into heaven at the close of that history.

The crucial role of the anomaly is not restricted to allegorical interpretation, as a brief survey of more recent methods indicates. For historical critics, anomalies signal a vast history of the text that lay hidden but for the hints that those breaks provide. Thus we are presented with all manner of sources that came together in the text we now have. The anomalies become signs of the editorial seams, where the former texts have been chopped up, rearranged, and linked together. For example, with Genesis 1–3, a text on which historical criticism first cut its teeth, the initial anomaly of the differing names for God (Elohim in Gen. 1:1–2:3 and Yahweh Elohim in Gen. 2:4–3:24) led eventually to a fully articulated hypothesis of sources (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly). Once one has "sources" (whether written or oral), one has to come up with a theory for their combination and editing, and so we find the full elaboration of a complex method called historical criticism with its various branches, especially source, form, and redaction (tradition-historical) criticism, as well as a few contributors such as archaeology and the social sciences. An extraordinary amount of energy has been and continues to be devoted to this over-arching method, but my point is that it arose and was elaborated in response to the anomaly—or rather, in response to a whole collection of anomalies that focused on the inconsistencies, breaks, overlaps, contradictions, different ideologies and various styles of the Hebrew Bible.

Despite its criticisms of historical criticism, feminist biblical analysis too trades in the anomaly. The difference is that the anomaly shifts ground. Many feminists continue to accept historical criticism as a base method, but the problem now becomes one of the overwhelming and multi-layered patriarchal nature of both text and interpretation. Often, the response to that anomaly, especially if one is committed to a religious institution, has been to seek other anomalies in the text where the myriad patriarchal structures show up their inconsistencies. In our example from Genesis 1–3, various anomalies have turned

up, but I would like to focus on Phyllis Trible's argument (Trible 1978) here.² She tried to reclaim the text for feminists by focusing on another anomaly: the first human being turns out to be an undifferentiated "earth creature," Adam. Only when the woman is created from this creature's side is there differentiation between man (אָדָם) and woman (אִשָּׁה). Much more has, of course, been written on Genesis 1–2,³ but my point is that feminist analysis in its increasingly diverse forms is an effort to deal with anomalies. Yet, note what has happened: the anomaly shifts ground depending on the assumptions of the method in question. If historical criticism seeks to account for breaks in the text by means of sources, redaction, communities, and scribal schools, then feminist analysis focuses on the inconsistencies and contradictions of the overarching patriarchal nature of the texts and their interpreters.

As for deconstruction, for all the challenges that it may have provided to the coherence of texts and their interpretations, it too draws its inspiration from the anomaly. It picks at the inconsistencies and incoherencies in texts, showing how they betray their various exclusions and blind spots. Let me use once again the example of the early chapters of Genesis, now in terms of the anomaly of paradise. Why, in a world in which human beings may freely eat of any tree without work and where they stroll with God and chat in the evenings, is there a central flaw? Simply put, if one were to create paradise, why place within it the mechanism for its own demise? It really is the anomaly with any "golden age," as David Jobling demonstrates: rather than attempting to deal with this contradiction theologically (it would not be a "golden age" if human beings did not have freewill), in terms of narrative necessity (we would not have a story if they didn't get on with eating from the tree), or even existentially (it would be incredibly boring in such a paradise), a deconstructive approach points out that paradise could not exist without such a flaw (Jobling 1992).

A similar situation exists with psychoanalytic criticism, where the anomaly becomes the constitutive exception: that which is excluded is precisely what enables the story to exist in the first place. Thus, in Genesis 1–3 we find different versions of this constitutive exception: the paradox of loss, with paradise becoming possible only at the moment of its loss (you do not know what you have got until it is gone); the afterthought of the creation of woman that actually makes her crucial to the whole system; the empty gesture that the man and woman have a choice but actually do not; and the inherent transgression of eating the fruit that seems to be lamentable and undesirable but is built into

2 I provide only representative examples here.

3 See especially the response to Trible by Mieke Bal in Bal 1987: 104–130.

the story itself (Boer 2006). Or, for queer criticism, the anomaly lies in the apparent heterosexism of a text (as much in its use for reading as in the text itself) that comes from a vastly different production of gender and sexuality. Thus, the androgyne lurks in the text that states “male and female God created them” (Gen. 1:27), as also in the undifferentiated “Adam” of Genesis 2 (queer criticism often overlaps with feminist criticism). Indeed, this image of “egalitarian” sexuality stands in stark contrast to the post-lapsarian world of patriarchal domination, with its utilitarian and hierarchical order (Carden 2006: 26–30).

For Marxist approaches, the anomaly takes yet another form. Thus, with our sample text of Genesis 1–3, Gale Yee argues that it exhibits a narrative tension that points to a deeper economic one (Yee 2003: 60–63). Thus, in the verse, “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24), we find an agenda that favours the nuclear family. Yee reads this text as an explicit agenda by the new kingship under Solomon to break the social, cultural, and economic allegiances to the older tribal structures and the *paterfamilias*. If one had primary loyalties to the clan, then the king would come a poor second. If the king was primary, then clan allegiances would start to break down. In this light, nuclear families would be far more likely to support the king. Deeper down, however, is a conflict of economic systems: if the clan embodied the “familial mode of production,” in which “family household was the basic socioeconomic unit,” then the king sought to impose a tributary mode of production, in which tribute and loyalty was due to the king (Yee 2003: 61). By now my point is expected: the anomaly may have shifted, but an anomaly it still is. The difference is that the anomaly in the text—why a nuclear family?—becomes a signal of a tension at a social and economic level. While they might differ on precisely how to read texts, Marxists share the assumption that the various anomalies in the text—whether in terms of form, the patterns of language, or indeed the content of conflicting ideologies—point to contradictions and tensions in the underlying economic systems.

Clearly, the anomaly in its varying forms is a crucial feature for each of the methods I have discussed. Yet, not all approaches are created equal. My preference is for a Marxist-inspired approach, for reasons I will explicate in a moment. Such an approach finds itself in the midst of multiple other methods of interpretation, among which it both realises its limits and provides a means for incorporating their insights. Indeed, this point leads to a preliminary reason for my preference, since the expansive nature of Marxism means that it provides a means for including the insights of other methods. Even more, the unashamedly totalising nature of Marxism is precisely the means for enabling other voices and approaches to have their say.

Anachronism

It is gross ethnocentrism to assume that the monk, the feudal lord, the Inca priest-king, the commissar, and the Trobriand islander are directed in their material lives to abide by the same market rules that drive the London stockbroker and the Iowa wheat farmer.

DALTON 1971: XXVIII; CF. DANILOVA 1971: 274

A crucial contribution of a Marxist-inspired approach is that it enables one to deal with the inescapable issue of methodological anachronism. In biblical criticism, anachronism often turns up via an objection in the turf wars between historical-critical approaches and what are variously called “newer literary” approaches or even (with a profound misunderstanding of the term) “postmodern” approaches—these include a disparate collection running all the way from Marxist methods to postcolonial or queer analysis. In this context, traditional historical-critical scholars object that “newer” methods (although they now date from the 1970s) impose modern categories on an ancient text and are, therefore, invalid. The assumption behind this objection is that historical-critical or archaeological or even social scientific methods are not anachronistic, that they are approaches appropriate to the biblical texts, their histories, and their contexts.

This assumption relies on a curious blind spot, for the supposedly historically sensitive methods championed by those who make the charge of anachronism are equally anachronistic. In short, all the methods we use have an inbuilt or structural anachronism that is produced by our very different mode of production with its ideological assumptions. This structural anachronism occurs in the very act of studying the past in the various ways we do so, for that act and our assumptions about a “past” that must be studied in certain ways assume notions about the past that are produced by the condition from which we study. However, I would take this a step further and argue that precisely those approaches assumed to be historically sensitive to these ancient texts or economic conditions are the most anachronistic of all, since their practitioners do not see the structural anachronism at work in the methods they champion.

How do we escape the net? The best way to do so is to build an awareness of that anachronism into the theory one is using. The theory proposed should—in a scale of increasing intensity—at all times be *aware* that it is engaged in an anachronistic task, that such anachronism is a *necessary* feature of any analysis of ancient societies, and that one *structures* the theory in order to include such anachronism in its very workings. The first two items (awareness and

necessity) may be achieved easily enough, but the question of structure is a little more challenging.

I suggest that we approach it in the following manner: the theory in question should include a *narrative of difference*. Both terms are vital. By narrative, I mean an account of the vast distance travelled in time between the socio-economic and ideological context we are investigating and the one from which we undertake such investigation. That ever-present narrative, which is always contested, rewritten, and contested again, means we have perpetually before us the distance from those ancient societies and their texts. By difference, I mean precisely that the narrative produces a profound sense of the difference between our own social formation and that of the texts we seek to study. Through that persistent difference is the issue of anachronism inescapably foregrounded. Yet this narrative of difference is more dialectically complex than it at first seems, for we may, hypothetically, find elements that seem exceedingly familiar—from gender to economic forms and literary production—but the way they are structured, their relationships to one another, the patterns of dominance and subordination, and their determining forms of social relations, are unfamiliar. At this point, the narrative of difference has its most difficult task.

The approaches that embody such narratives of difference within their workings are mostly Marxist-inspired. Let me give two examples. The first is G. E. M. de Ste. Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981), which is significant for the wholesale deployment of Marxist class theory in order to make sense of the social and economic tensions in the millennium from the beginnings of Greek dominance to the end of the Eastern Roman Empire. Crucially, Ste. Croix develops his argument through an exhaustive analysis of ancient Greek texts. But his real value is that the theory upon which he bases his work includes precisely that structural presence of distance, difference, and anachronism that I seek. How so? Marxist theory makes use of a continually contested and reformulated narrative of modes of production, a narrative that emphasizes the vast distances and continuities between the different economic structures throughout history. By that means, a theoretical approach that was first developed in order to analyse the workings of capitalism is able to be aware of its own anachronisms as it is applied to ancient and very non-capitalist social formations. The secret is that through its account of the beginnings and then dominance of capitalism, it shows the way that capitalism differs from all that has gone before it. Thus, it is able to develop new categories of analysis that maintain structurally the awareness of difference.

A similar point applies to the Marxist-inspired *régulation* theory, which I and Christina Petterson have used extensively in our reconstruction of the economies of ancient Southwest Asia and the Mediterranean (Boyer and Saillard [eds.] 2002; Jessop and Sum 2006; Boer 2015; Boer and Petterson 2017). It too includes within its structure a narrative of difference. For the *régulation* theorists, each mode of production, if not each regime of *régulation* (a period of relative stability within a mode of production), is qualitatively different from the others, whether those that have existed before, those that exist side by side, or those that absorb others within itself. Thus, the distinct culture and set of institutions and relations established within a mode of production attempt to deal with a set of problems in a way that marks it off from others. Now it becomes interesting and thoroughly dialectical, for it is precisely through such qualitative changes that the system is reproduced. Thus, for Michel Aglietta, the study of *régulation* “is the study of the transformation of social relations as it creates new forms that are both economic and non-economic, that are organized in structures and themselves reproduce a determinant structure, the mode of production” (Aglietta 2000: 16). In other words, not only are these qualitative differences constitutive of the system in question, but they mark the structural presence of the narrative of difference.

Responsive Metaphorisation

Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.

ALTHUSSER 1971: 165

Beyond the structural presence of anachronism via a narrative of difference, a deeper insight provided by a Marxist approach concerns the relations between texts and their contexts. I suggest that texts may be understood as ideological answers to social and economic questions, which we do not always have or of which we are not necessarily aware. The catch is that the answers are rarely, if ever, direct, for the answers offered by texts attempt to resolve the socio-economic tensions in a way that leaves all manner of traces in the texts. The reason these traces survive is that an ideological response is never able to resolve a real, social tension. Obviously, this approach challenges two approaches common in biblical criticism: (1) texts reflect their contexts in a relatively unproblematic fashion; and (2) they express the political and religious agenda—pious propaganda—of their unknown authors. As for the first approach, little has changed for over a century. Since biblical texts reflect their contexts, they are

assumed to provide more or less reliable evidence of that context so that one may read evidence directly from them.⁴ The second, increasingly common, approach argues that biblical texts are politico-religious tracts produced to assert different political positions. Produced much later than the events they purport to describe, the texts tend to be historically unreliable since they are primarily ideological, although they may give indirect insights into the later contexts in which they were written. This latter approach is more characteristic of those who write of the political dimensions of biblical narrative, although it may be traced back in the modern era to Morton Smith's *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (1972).

A more sophisticated approach to the issue of texts and contexts has three features.⁵ The first is the Marxist notion of the “relatively autonomous” character of the cultural-ideological instance with respect to the economic. As Louis Althusser famously observed, the economy may be the determinant of all others, but only “in the last instance.” In other words, the domains of life—politics, law, culture, ideology, religion, and so on—are sufficiently autonomous so that they are not pre-determined by the economic. Althusser continues:

In History, these instances, the superstructures, etc.—are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strides along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes.

ALTHUSSER 1977: 113

Althusser offers a delicate dialectic of the relation between elements of the superstructure and the economic “last instance.” The economy is always present, always striding through history, but it never silences the voices of the superstructure. These voices may be related to the economic base, but the lonely hour of economic explanation never utters the last word. That is to say, while the various domains of a mode of production (in which the dynamic of base and superstructure operates) may be autonomous to some extent, they are never entirely autonomous, for they are part of a much larger whole. Hence, they are semi-autonomous, relating to one another in all manner of indirect fashions.

⁴ This curse is particularly prevalent among archaeologists, see, for instance, Stager 1985; Dever 2001; Day (ed.) 2004; Ackerman 2008.

⁵ What follows is a summary of a fuller explication in Boer 2015.

The second feature explicates what Althusser's argument means for literature. It begins with the observation that texts metaphorise their situations. By this I mean the production of metaphorical relations—often contradictory—to the political and economic situation in which texts are produced. The basis of metaphorisation is straightforward: speaking, thinking, and writing are saturated by metaphors of the dominant socio-economic systems. Indeed, metaphorisation is a crucial signal of such dominance. For example, under capitalism human relations are often cast in terms of economic relations and the market—competition, survival of the fittest, individual entrepreneurship; in short, a metaphorisation of the market. In the Bible, by contrast, we find a different set of metaphors. The images of ideal gardens, fertility, merchant kings, bands of a patron's thugs, Sabbaths, and kinship function as complex metaphors of the social and economic situation.

How is this different from texts "reflecting" their contexts, albeit with a little more sophistication? It seems like perfect common sense. The possible range of our imagination is limited by the socio-economic context in which we live, along with the inherited metaphors that have found their place in this new context. Here another dimension of my approach comes into play, for one always operates with a healthy dose of ideological suspicion—deployed with devastating brilliance by Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School (Bloch 1995, 2009; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). That suspicion leads one to suspect that this process of metaphorisation is never direct, so that it becomes difficult to read images of the political and economic situation directly from texts. And it ensures that one is always suspicious of arguments that texts express the conscious politico-religious agenda of their authors. Here subconscious and unnoticed features play a far larger role, as do structural and linguistic elements in the way written language is constructed. Most of the time, they know not what they do.

The reason that texts have little idea of what they are doing is that textual responses to their contexts are often unexpected, precisely because they are semi-autonomous. They may metaphorise their context, but they do so in unanticipated and indirect ways. For instance, a story of kinship or tribal conflict does not necessarily mean a text comes from a tribal situation. The text's tribal world may be an imaginary creation in a different context, perhaps to provide an alternate model of human relations or distribution of resources. Similarly, the detailed images of idyllic gardens, from Genesis to the Song of Songs, may seem to provide an alternative picture from life as it might be, a world in which exploitation, debt, and violence are absent. But they may also express the idealized image of palatine and temple estates, in which food is apparently produced without labour, thereby effacing the actual role of indentured labour

in those estates. More significantly, contradictions embodied in narratives of disobedience and rebellion, or in structural breaks as in the story of Cain and Abel, may give voice not so much to arguments over different social formations as to impossible contradictions at a socio-economic level.

All of this brings me to the third feature, which may be described as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. The idea derives from Lévi-Strauss (1989: 229–56), although he formulated it through the inspiration of Marx.⁶ The key is that problematic and irresolvable socio-economic tensions show up indirectly in the cultural products of a society, whether art, literature, festivals, and, in our day, film, television, internet, and so on. These cultural products set out to resolve the tensions in many different ways. To give a few examples, a story may appear to concern family struggles, the recovery of a long-lost brother, subsequent enslavement and liberation, but it does so by means of a structural tension between estates and subsistence agriculture (Joseph versus Moses). Or a text—Job—may lift cries up to God for undeserved suffering, but its formal structure (prologue-epilogue versus poetry) speaks of the cyclical destruction and recovery of landlord estates and the laments of a landlord at his unfortunate lot. Or, the ethical oppositions in Proverbs may speak of the higher calling of wisdom, humility, and righteousness, but the ethical oppositions that structure the text are actually saturated with class assumptions. Clearly, textual and thereby cultural responses are myriad rather than singular.

Suspicion and Discernment

Blithely ignorant of the gunpowder they are handling (*ohne Ahnung solchen Sprengpulvers*).

BLOCH 2009: 29

Thus far I have explored the structural presence of anachronism, and the unexpected nature of metaphorisation in response to socio-economic contradictions. There remains the unavoidable axiological moment of interpretation, in which ideological suspicion and discernment are crucial. However, before I explain how they work, some preliminary ground-clearing is needed. Such an

6 It was subsequently framed in Althusserian language and mediated by Fredric Jameson (Althusser 1971: 127–86; Jameson 1981: 77–80). Lévi-Strauss's famous example concerns the conflicting axes of facial art among the Caduveo tribe in Brazil. This was, he argues, an effort to overcome the social tensions generated by the lack of moieties, which would otherwise have mitigated the caste system among that tribe.

axiological dimension assumes that one never reads a text from a neutral political position—a point that, sadly, still needs to be reiterated. The argument that one should not be political or “ideological”—in the name of “scholarly” or “scientific” research—is a default option for the status quo. As Wallerstein puts it so well, the claim by academic disciplines to eschew any ideological or—God forbid—partisan features is really a process by which the Western world studies itself, explains its own functioning, the better to control what is happening (Wallerstein 2011: 264). This initial point is, of course, an exercise in ideological suspicion and discernment; to understand how they work more fully in relation to interpretation, I draw on the insights of Ernst Bloch (Bloch 1988: 163–85, 1995, 2009).

Literary interpretation is in many respects an exercise in ideological detective work. Once again, I take the example of the Bible, in which texts can be revolutionary and reactionary at the very same time. I mean not only the variety of texts, gathered over centuries, which compete with one another for political dominance. Even more, I mean that revolution and reaction, utopia and dystopia, are entwined within the very same text that one analyses. This requires a deeply dialectical approach to the task of literary detective work, an approach that comes to the fore in the treatment of myth.

Myth is neither pure false consciousness that needs to be unmasked nor a positive force without qualification. No matter how repressive, all myths, like ideology, have an emancipatory, if not utopian, dimension about them that cannot be separated so easily from deception and illusion. In the very process of manipulation and domination, one finds a utopian residue that has not been entirely incinerated in the white heat of reaction, an element that opens up other possibilities at the very point of failure (Kellner 1997). Although we need to be “wary of the mythical sphere in its entirety” (Bloch 1998: 296), particularly due to its abuse in terms of the *Volk* and the exclusive universal of liberalism (Losurdo 2011), myths also contain stories of murmuring, subversion, and rebellion, that is, the possibility for human beings to assert themselves with dignity against oppressors. If the Bible is not always folly to the rich, it is also the Church’s bad conscience.

In order to see how this approach to literature is developed, I turn to Bloch’s debate in with Rudolf Bultmann, the biblical scholar and theologian who proposed a program of demythologization of the Bible and theology (Bultmann 1952–55). For Bultmann, the Bible inescapably contains the forms of thought, language, and belief of the time in which its various parts were composed. Indeed, the dominant mode of expression was myth. Thus, for the gospel, the *kerygma*, to be meaningful in our situation, this mythological structure must be excised from the Church’s message. Bultmann had in mind not the accretions

to the central message: he urged that the basic components of Christianity derived from the New Testament—such as a three-tiered cosmos with heaven above and hell below, the miracles of Jesus (especially the empty tomb and the resurrection), the coming of the Holy Spirit and the return of Christ on the clouds at the end of history—should all be discarded as unworkable and unbelievable myths. This is only a basic list, but once the demythologizing task was complete, Bultmann called for a remythologization in terms of the contemporary patterns of thought, specifically the understanding of existentialism that had swept through European philosophy.

Bloch replies by arguing for both a dialectical reading of myth and a strategy of discernment. To begin with, myths should not all be lumped together as some “imbecility of the primeval forest” that human beings have now left in their sober maturity (Bloch 1998: 297). Some myths may well be discarded, since they speak of fear, ignorance, and superstition. But others should be treasured, such as the myths, legends, sagas, and fairy tales that give expression to the quality and wonder of nature. Above all, the myths that need to be retained are those that speak of transformation and liberation, of cunning heroes who win through a ruse, even of moments of rebellion. Indeed, a characteristic of mythology is that it attempts to negotiate potential threats to the established order. Are myths then full of liberation, a lost treasure of the revolutionary imagination that has been sadly neglected?

The answer is not so simple. Myths may contain myriad moments of challenge to and rebellion against the status quo, or at least the order that seeks to establish itself. But these stories almost always try to show how alternatives are not viable, how rebellion against the rulers will end up in punishment, torture, and cruel death. The story of Prometheus in Greek mythology is a good example, as is the account of the “Fall” in the Bible. Many others may be added to the list: the fatal conflict of Cain and Abel, where Cain is simultaneously banished and protected with the well-known mark; Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32; the rebellion of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11; the murmuring of the people in the wilderness against the oppressive deity of Moses and Aaron; the insurrections of Miriam, Moses’s sister, and Korah against that authority; the protests of Job against his inhuman treatment by this same Yahweh; the prophetic denunciations of economic maltreatment and religious hypocrisy; Jesus’s stringent criticisms of the quislings who would accommodate the Roman colonisers; and the fiery revolutionary protests of the Apocalypse against empire and its gods.

How are we to read these stories? I prefer to read them dialectically, “destroying and saving” them “in a single dialectical process” (Bloch 2009: 27). Simply put, we would not have these moments of insurrection without the

reactionary stories in which they are located. The accounts of control and suppression preserve and, indeed, encourage insurrection. For all their efforts to cast such rebellion as sin, as a challenge to the deity, and for all the dire punishments that might be meted out—expulsion from the garden, swallowing up by the earth or a collection of plagues, diseases and sheer divine destruction—these stories also maintain the very possibility of subversion in their very structure. Thus, we need to keep both the conformist and nonconformist elements of such stories, since their banishment discards their “joyful message,” the “deepest utopian theme” along with all that is oppressive (Bloch 1998: 300).

Yet at some point one must take sides. Here the discernment of texts appears once again, when one must exercise a “particularly sober and discerning mind” that does not take such texts at face value, without shades of difference (Bloch 2009: 27). This discernment is an effort to sort the wheat from the weeds, to find the moments of insurrection in the midst of reactionary oppression. All the same, it is easier than it appears to be. We cannot simply compile a list—progressive accounts in the “pro” column and reactionary ones in the “con” column. So often both are entwined with the very same account. Further, not all revolutions are the same: a “palace” revolution where one part of the ruling elite replaces another hardly makes a difference. And then revolutions have a knack of turning sour, for those who championed freedom turn with dismaying alacrity into oppressors themselves. What I seek, therefore, are the moments of insurrection that come from the proverbial “bottom up,” from those who are themselves downtrodden and represented as the rabble, the mob, the uneducated, and the poor. Only then can we make a start in clearly taking sides.

The Future?

I suggested earlier that a Marxist approach is unashamedly totalising, but this raises a question with ramifications for the future of biblical criticism. Does not such an approach, through its very totalising, close down other potential approaches? The issue is one of diversity, which has been a characteristic of biblical criticism since the 1970s. This diversity is not merely one of method, but also of location. As the collection called *The Future of the Biblical Past* (Boer and Segovia [eds.] 2012) noted, the North Atlantic dominance of biblical criticism is fading. One may use the terminology of “globalisation” to speak of such developments, but a sharper analysis indicates that it is precisely the period following the anti-colonial movements of the 1930s to the 1960s that generated

the conditions for this development. I will have more to say on this matter in a moment, but first let me examine the question of diversity.

We may opt for a liberal form of tolerance or diversity, in which individual voices are championed. These may be in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, psychoanalysis, and so on. The danger here is twofold. The first concerns the championing of “choice.” One may choose a particular identity, thereby freeing oneself from some form of determinism or essentialism. Freedom to choose is, of course, a leitmotiv of liberal ideology, in which the private individual is sacrosanct. Second, liberal ideology may argue that all are created free, but the category of “all” undergoes a crucial restriction, for not everyone is included. More specifically, liberal freedom is not so much limited in extent (entailing the need for extension of this freedom) but requires structurally geared exclusions to constitute “freedom.” So we find John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* suggesting that “despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians,” since liberty is reserved for “human beings in the maturity of their faculties” (1859: 23, 22). Or when Thomas Jefferson opined in *The Declaration of Independence* that “all men are created equal,” he did so as a slave owner—as also were the others involved in the declaration or indeed the Constitution of the United States. The examples could be multiplied many times, as Domenico Losurdo does very well in his *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (2011). But my point is that the liberal notion of “free choice”—which underlies a good number of moves in literary theory, cultural studies and biblical criticism—implicitly operates with a similar agenda.

The answer may well lie elsewhere, with what may be called the production of diversity out of unity. To gain a sense of this more dialectical approach, I turn to the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s. Here we find the development of the world’s first and most comprehensive “affirmative action” or—better—“positive action” program. This was focused on the many minority nationalities (or what would now be called “ethnic minorities”), fostering languages, cultural traditions, literature, education, economics, and governance (Martin 2001). The result was an extraordinary program, costing millions of roubles, that even brought some groups out of near oblivion to develop a clear identity. But I am interested in the way this program—obviously totalising and undertaken by a socialist state—generated hitherto unexpected diversity. Let me quote none other than Stalin on the question of language and nationalities:

Until now what has happened has been that the socialist revolution has not diminished but rather increased the number of languages; for, by stirring up the lowest sections of humanity and pushing them on to the

political arena, it awakens to new life a number of hitherto unknown or little-known nationalities. Who could have imagined that the old, tsarist Russia consisted of not less than fifty nations and national groups? The October Revolution, however, by breaking the old chains and bringing a number of forgotten peoples and nationalities on to the scene, gave them new life and a new development.

STALIN 1954: 141

This development was unexpected (as were many other features, some of them being significant problems that needed new solutions). Even more was the anti-colonial struggle that grew out of the affirmative action program. By the 1930s, it became clear that the question of national (or ethnic) diversity was not merely a matter for the Soviet Union itself: this was a global concern. So we find a gradual realisation of the implications for struggles against European imperialism in all parts of the world. This led to active support of anti-colonial struggles, from Asia through Africa to South America, indeed wherever such struggles began to take place. And the Soviet Union matched words with actions, providing arms, logistics, training, and technology to assist with struggles. Not only did this action feed into the myth of communist aggression and world dominance, but it also provided the conditions for what became post-colonialism, in terms of both a period after colonialism and the theoretical elaboration—the latter of which could begin only after 1989 and by effacing this history (Petterson forthcoming).

Where does this leave us in thinking about the future of biblical criticism? I am not, of course, suggesting that Marxist criticism should dominate around the globe, since I prefer the Chinese approach in which each region has its own specific historical features, generating conditions for different socio-economic, political, and cultural forms today. Instead, I would like to suggest that one way forward may well be the emergence of an over-arching method to biblical criticism that structurally generates diversity in a way that we have not yet seen. As for what such an approach may be, it may be better to leave the answer to history.

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Grammars of Sacrifice: Futures, Subjunctives, and What Would Have/Could Have Happened on Mount Moriah*

Yvonne Sherwood

I dwell in Possibility—
a fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors.

EMILY DICKINSON 1999: 466

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The Futures of Man¹

Throughout the centuries, but most fervently with the rise of a self-conscious ‘humanism’ when so much depended upon it, the anxious human has worked very, very hard on a very long list of the various capabilities or attributes that will finally separate him from the animal. So, men have hoped and hypothesised, man alone has reason; technique; laws; cities; speech; writing; cooking; kitchens; altars; gifts; tools; being-towards-death; burial; religion; commerce; or the remarkable hand which can be ‘talon, hoof[s] and horn[s] at will’ (Aristotle, *Part. an.* 687b.3–4). And *man alone has a unique relation to time and tense*. From Nietzsche’s concept of man as a promising animal (Nietzsche 1996: 39), to (more recently) George Steiner’s *Grammars of Creation*, man begins *qua* man in the future, with the future, and, in particular, the future tense. ‘Animals would appear to know presentness and, one supposes, a measure of

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1 I am using the term ‘man’ here because philosophical discussions on the unique nature of ‘man’ have not included ‘women’ in any simple sense, and therefore inclusive language would be misleading. In these discourses, woman is far more likely to function as one of the others of ‘man’ than she is to feature as a subset or variety of ‘man’ *qua* human.

remembrance', hazards Steiner, venturing boldly into that distinctly human (?) space of the hypothesis or thesis (Steiner 2010: 6). But unique to human beings is the 'future tense' and the subjunctive or counterfactual modes that are 'kindred to' the future tense (Steiner 2010: 7). Man's uniquely human soul lies in grammar, the 'nerve structure ... of ... consciousness' (Steiner 2010: 6, 293), that allows him to project a time beyond his death; or in outer space a million years hence; or alternative parallel worlds spiralling out from 'if clauses' such as 'If Caesar had not gone to the Capitol that day' (Steiner 2010: 7). In Steiner's potted evolutionary grammar, the future tense is related to those other fundamentals of man: cooking, kitchens, food storage, tools (and sacrifice?). In all *probability*, he hypothesises, the futures and subjunctives came late to human speech, maybe even as late as the end of the last ice age 'together with the "futurities" entailed by food storage' and 'the making and preservation of tools beyond immediate need' (Steiner 2010: 6). Man became himself in that first unique utterance of words like 'shall', 'will' and 'if', 'circling around an intricate field of semantic force around a hidden centre or nucleus of potentiality' (Steiner 2010: 7). In his discovery of the future—here at least as momentous as the discovery of fire—man discovered a way of sustaining life after death, and a mode of infinite regeneration and living-on through those 'supreme fictions empowered by syntax': hope and fear (Steiner 2010: 7).

I like this possibility that man alone dwells in possibility and its infinitely generative implications (all that follows). I am drawn to this 'what if'. The 'what if' pulls you in. If the human occurs in the grammatical space of alternative or future worlds, then, in the present, in the here and now, man is never uniquely himself. Man is always to come. He is to follow, as in Derrida's punning 'je suis' (Derrida 2002). The idea that man's unique being lies in or with the future is one of those most fascinating myths of man's distinctiveness: the ones—like Prometheus and Epimetheus or Adam and Eve—that locate man's uniqueness not in his powers, but in the 'pit of lack': man's nakedness, sin, guilt (Derrida 2002: 389). Man alone, Steiner's origin myth seems to say, has his unique being in ambiguity, and grammatical and literary sleights of hand. To him alone lies the future, the promise (the promise that can always be broken); the subjunctive; and also (because how could this not follow?), the prophetic, the performative; and also irony (simultaneously affirming *and* denying, saying *and* not saying); and also, while we are at it, scare quotes, inverted commas, whereby something is simultaneously 'said' and not said. To him alone is the special art of lying and also literature, a 'kind of writing in which you can neither lie, tell the truth, nor make a mistake' (Eagleton 2004: 89). *'Every human use of the future tense of the verb "to be" is a negation, however limited, of mortality'*, writes

Steiner (2010: 7). This fundamental structure of human grammar is *sacrificial*. In the modest sacrifices of modality, we give up and, in a sense, negate what is in order to make plural possibilities, myriad lives, more and less substantial. As Abraham offers up one son and gets a heavenful of sons, so modality offers up or qualifies or pluralises what is, in order to make new possible lives (those that were, that could have been; and those that might yet live, or live again). These alternative worlds and lives cohabit and haunt one another. In the pedestrian everyday work of the imagination and grammar, what is, what happened, past simple, is haunted and hollowed out by what could be, what might have been, what or who could also (yet) take place.

The self-conscious and highly developed idioms of modern scholarship lead us to denounce tricks of literature and language, *while at the same time relying on all the modest modes of modality*. As scholars, our work depends on the expansive freedoms of hypothesis, and the carefully qualified status of that which ‘appears’ to be, or that which ‘might’ (in all probability, or at least *some* probability) be the case. Where would we be—how could we breathe and do our work—without the maybe and the perhaps and the ability to go out on a limb safely in the conditional, ambiguously committed logic of the ‘what if’ or the ‘if ... then’? But at the same time, our training as biblical scholars leads us to imagine that we can and must separate the ‘literary’, the ‘philosophical’ and the tendentially imaginative-speculative, from proper commentary which rests austere (sacrificially) on the pure historical fact of the text. In an awkward separation of the professional from the confessional, we spin numerous hypotheses, while disavowing acts of writing as acts of hope, risk, decision and faith.

As a consequence, for all mountains of books that have piled up around Mount Moriah, we have repeatedly missed the central point: the fact that this is a *giant act of testimony in the subjunctive or conditional tense*. Had God wanted him to go through with it, Abraham would have gone through with it and this is the whole point. Abraham *would have* done this. The text is about a gesture *towards* an act: a motion on the way to an act—and back. Abraham does not *quite* go through with it. The knife does not go through the skin. The sacrifice is turned into a ‘sacrifice’, in scare quotes. The act is not completed, but nor is it negated. It hangs eternally in conflicted middle space. Blood turns into ink, but the text retains all the productive power of an actual sacrifice, and the regenerative world-creating power of the futures and conditionals that go with sacrifice. We can read this myth as a myth of grammar: a graphic tableau of Steiner’s vision of the infinitely productive power of the future or conditional tense. ‘Because you have “done” this’ (יַעַן כִּי עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה) says the angelic

messenger,² [‘done’ being in inverted commas, with what Abraham has ‘done’ shifting, in quick sleight of hand, from a blood sacrifice to a ‘not-withholding’ (וְלֹא חֲשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְדֶיךָ)], I will bless you with sons as numerous as stars and grains of sand’ (Gen. 22. 16). *Son sacrifice is so powerful that it can produce a whole future, a whole world, even when its powers are contained (or should that be ‘infinitely unleashed?’) in the conditional perfect tense.*

The productive power of the act, combined with the retraction or commuting of the act, feels a little like irony, where something is simultaneously affirmed and negated, said and unsaid. But unlike irony, where the emphasis is on the negation or subversion, here the two sides seem equally weighted. And the equal weighting has ethical implications, in both directions. You can hear the text as saying that this is something that Abraham *would* have done (and it’s very good that he would have), and at the same time that this is not something that he actually did (and it’s also very good that he did not, though a different kind of good). Excruciatingly, the text is even-handedly ambiguous and ambidextrous. The ‘act’ is suspended between the hand of the angel and the hand of Abraham on the knife. On the one hand; and on the other hand. God commands the sacrifice; aborts the sacrifice; and praises and rewards Abraham for this willingness to sacrifice, which he takes as if it were a real son sacrifice—at the same time substituting a ram. So what happens? What does God want? Where is the will of God, and where is truth, between all these hands?

One can only enter this text if one is able to enter that uniquely human space of futurity, promising, modality, and competing futures and subjunctives, which is also the space of the optative, the cohortative and prayer. The *akedah* does not just have a long and obsessive history. It has a dense and long history of *longing*. A material forcefield of longing—built up of the ‘if only’, the ‘what if’, the prayer for an angel, and the invocation of alternative parallel worlds and stories—have gathered around this haunting text.

This dense and conflicted space of grammar and futurity was made tangible, in all its material depth and range of possibility, in Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway’s powerful staging of the sacrifice in the *Obedience/Gehorsam* exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Room 5, ‘God and the Angel’ (Fig. 1), was presented as a prayer room, with removed shoes lying at the entrance. It was tempting to take off one’s shoes and feel one’s feet sinking into the deep soft white carpet. The walls were lined with soft white feathers and black and white photographs of clasped, praying hands. A dead or sleeping swan curled into itself on the table. In the ghostly video installation playing on a second

2 Note that the angelic messenger speaks for God in the first person.



FIGURE 1 Room 5, *The Angel*. Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway, Gehorsam, Jewish Museum Berlin

white table, an angel wrestled with Abraham in an elaborate dance of wills. From the ceiling was suspended Xooang Chai's 'The Wings' (*die Flügel*): a fragile mobile of human hands caressing and touching each other, and fanning out in both directions like a pair of angel's wings.

Modern readers have often felt compelled, for good modern reasons, to practice their own strange soteriology, attempting to save Abraham and the Bible by turning Genesis 22 into a straightforward teach-text. 'The true God banned child sacrifice' (completed action, past simple): a reading that relies on the dubious historical assertion that the lesson was needed because the Canaanites had (for inexplicable reasons) been sacrificing (past perfect continuous) their children all the time. This historical assertion in the past simple gets us out of ambiguity and out of the subjunctive, but at the expense of suggesting an *ironic* reading of the text. The canonical modern reading weights the original double-handed gesture as if it were ironic, as if this text were now all for and *only* for the negation or subversion of human sacrifice. When God said, 'Sacrifice your son', he *really* meant the opposite. What was commanded should never have happened. God only commanded this so that it would not happen, so that Abraham would learn that it should never happen. The command was like an ironic statement: said but not really meant.

This simple and, in a very narrow sense, ‘critical’, modern reading seems reductive and banal when compared to so-called pre-critical or pre-modern acts of interpretation, which tend to *multiply* subjunctives and conditionals and use them as safe spaces for exploring scenarios that never actually came to pass. Refusing the traditional roles that moderns assign to them, as caricatures of ‘tradition’, ‘literalism’ or ‘blind belief’ (to be opposed to modern criticism), ancient interpreters actively ask what it could, would or should mean to read this text faithfully or to be true to this story, *given that the text itself stops short of the faithful-literal execution of the literal command*. Delicately poised acts of writing enable complex ethical judgements. By staying with the subjunctive, pre-modern interpreters are able to articulate the negative incredulous (‘This is dreadful: it is unbelievable that a man would do this’) and the positive incredulous (‘This is unbelievable, amazing’), and to compress both responses in the same sentence, text or performative space. The two modulations of response are very close together and so it all comes down to tone, performance, and the way you say it, or ‘say’ it.

Lost Futures

In good scholarly tradition, I will now demonstrate my hypothesis with examples—examples intended to make the probability of my hypothesis more concrete. For my sources, I have deliberately chosen some slightly more familiar ancient Jewish texts and some lost Christian texts in Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Middle English that have not (yet) made into that now rather distinct set of canonised afterlives of Genesis 22. Appropriately, Judah Goldin locates the *akedah* at the ‘centre of the nervous systems of Christianity and Judaism’ (Goldin 1993: xxi). The reference to the *nervous* system is hardly accidental. And Jewish interpretation uses all the resources of grammar, Steiner’s ‘nerve centre ... of ... consciousness’ (Steiner 2010: 293), to unravel the parallel worlds of (im)possibility that spool outwards from this text. In *Biblical Antiquities* 18.5, Pseudo-Philo’s God says: ‘And he brought him to be placed on the altar, but I gave him back to his father’ *and/but* ‘his offering was acceptable to me and on account of his blood I chose them’ (cf. *Gen. R.* 55.5). The angel comes—and/but the knife is stained blood red. Isaac is (and here come the inverted commas) ‘slain’. The medieval Midrash Ha-Gadol claims that the ram was also called Isaac (*Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 22.13; cf. Mann 1940: 67). On one hand, or one hoof, Isaac lives; on the other hand, or the other hoof, Isaac dies. The suggestion also begs the question of substitution (how can a ram stand in for a man?) and creates the riddle of a ram with a proper name.

This is not the same inflection of the man-animal that we find in self-consciously modern readings, such as Immanuel Kant's tortured departure from this text.³ The midrash is not protesting, as Kant does, that by 'treating the poor boy as a sheep', Abraham is denying Isaac's fundamental human dignity or *Würde*. Nor is this like that strangest of Abraham variations, penned by Søren Kierkegaard, where Abraham feels so profoundly 'at variance with what it is to be a man' that he tells God that he may as well have been turned into a centaur, or a horse.⁴ The focus is not—as it is in modern readings—on the 'beast' and the 'sovereign', or the claim that Abraham and his God are shading into the bestial (unnatural, or like the natural animal), at the moment when they place themselves outside the law, and specifically the law 'Thou shalt not kill'. In a very different spirit, pre-modern interpretation stages the interchangeability and permeability of the bodies of the Isaac and the ram. In two fifth-century Syriac Christian homiletic liturgical poems or *memra* (the second of which uses grammar indicating female authorship), Abraham and Isaac bring a miraculous golden fleece of many colours down from the mountain, and Isaac gets into, or carries, the skin of the lamb/ram, as Jacob (quite literally) gets into the skin of Esau and Joseph puts on his כְּהֶנֶךְ פִּסִּים. These beautifully syncretistic poems are perhaps confusing the ram's coat with the exceptional garment that the LXX, Vulgate and Targumim read as Joseph's multi-coloured coat, but seem to be deliberately invoking the classical legend of the χρυσόμαλλον δέρας, the golden fleece.⁵ The fleece commemorates the flying *ram* sent by the true mother, Nephele, to rescue her children, Phrixus and Helle, from *human sacrifice*. The parallels with the sacrifice of Isaac seem irresistible, which is why it is so surprising that Sebastian Brock can only concede the 'remarkable (*but no doubt fortuitous*) parallel in the legend of the golden fleece', admitting that it is

3 For Kant's revulsion at 'Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God's command', see Kant 1979: 115; see also Kant 1970: 175. I return to Kant, and his very different understanding of the possible and impossible, at the end of this essay.

4 'The whole experience has made me forever at variance with what it is to be human. If it had pleased you, O Lord, to let me be changed into a horse, yet remaining human, I would be no more at variance with what it is to be a man than I have become through what has just happened' (Kierkegaard 1967–78: 3.714).

5 The two poems are translated by Sebastian Brock; see Brock 1986. Throughout I shall be following Brock and distinguishing them as *Memra* 1 and *Memra* 2. In *Memra* 1, Sarah describes the fleece as 'fair, luxurious and glistening ... variegated with all sorts of colours', too bright and luminous to be looked on directly, unless one's eye is strong (Brock 1986: 111, ll.153–55). In *Memra* 2, the fleece 'does not resemble the fleece of ordinary sheep', has the appearance of all sorts of colours', and cannot be examined, except with the 'eyes of the prophets' (Brock 1986: 124, ll.91–93).

'just conceivable' that the author had the 'tale of the Golden Fleece' at the 'back of his mind' (Brock 1986: 116, *Memra* 1, my emphasis). The strange formulation suggests that the author could have known it, but that he would not—could not?—have allowed it in through the carefully-guarded front gate of his conscious mind.

As Isaac puts on or carries the ram's skin and becomes the ram/lamb, so several early Christian sources imagine a poignant, or grotesque, conflation and con-fusion of Sarah and Isaac: bodies that the biblical text struggles to keep apart. In the second Syriac liturgical poem, the mother, who intuits the secret to come, groans with great feeling, and pleads:

Let me go up with you to the burnt offering and let me see my only child
being sacrificed;
if you are going to bury him in the ground I will dig the hole with my
own hands,
and if you are going to build up stones, I will carry them on my
shoulders;
the lock of my white hairs in old age, I will provide for his bonds ...

BROCK 1986: 123, *Memra* 2, LL.25–29

When Abraham tests her by returning alone with stories of Isaac's actual death, she bursts into a perfect continuous optative (even as she passes the test-within-the-test):

I was wishing I was an eagle, or had the speed of a turtle dove,
so that I might go and behold that place where my only child, my
beloved, was sacrificed,
that I might bring back a little of his blood to be comforted by its smell.
I had some of his hair to place somewhere inside my clothes,
and when grief overcame me I placed it over my eyes.
I had some of his clothes so that I might imagine (him), putting them in
front of my eyes,
and when suffering sorrow overcame me I gained relief through gazing
upon them.
I wished I could see his pyre and the place where his bones were burnt,
and could bring a little of his ashes and gaze on them always and be
comforted ...

BROCK 1986: 125, *Memra* 2, LL.113–22

With hands outstretched as if in prayer, or on the wing, Sarah wishes that she could fly upwards, backwards in time. She longs to have been able to change

time and tense and to have been with her son at the moment of sacrifice. Excluded from that exceptional moment, she wishes that she could have or that she could have had the lingering smell of her son's blood inside her nostrils; his hair inside her clothes; his hair placed over her eyes, binding her eyes; and his ashes and blood to look at and smell always. It is as if the poet wants to go as far in the demonstration of mother-love as Genesis 22 goes in its affirmation of Abraham's extreme love for God (even as far as the offering of the only son, the beloved one). The poetry pushes an equally extreme counter-poetics of attachment, that is similarly without limits, and that becomes too intensely necrophiliac for modern tastes.⁶ Rather than one figure symbolising another and becoming another in the realm of typology, one body gets into the skin of another. As Isaac puts on the ram's fleece, the mother wants to take Isaac's body (back) into her insides.

In an Easter sermon, Pseudo-Chrysostom imagines a Sarah who (had she been consulted) could have, would have and must have assaulted Abraham with a barrage of questions:

Where are you bringing him? Where are you taking him? You didn't have a vision, did you? For how would God have appeared and asked for your son whom He has given to me against all the odds?

Somewhat hilariously for the modern feminist reader, he then adds: '*She would have saught to wrap him up in her womb ... Women are in such cases very emotionally involved*' (Pseudo-Chrysostom, Easter Homily; cf. PG 56 col. 539–41). Isaac, who oscillates between a young boy and a 30-year-old young child—a *talya* in the Peshitta—now becomes a foetus. Sarah wants to hide Isaac back inside her uterus, for protection, as if in a strange take on Nicomedus's or Job's metaphors of being (un)born again, in strange folds of time. Similarly, the Sarah of the second Syriac *memra* wants to inhale the smell of her son, as Isaac inhales the earthy smell of Esau (Gen. 27.27). She wants to keep his blood and ashes and place his hair over her eyes. In a *kontakion*⁷ on the sacrifice of Isaac for the fourth Sunday of Lent, the sixth-century Byzantine poet, Romanos Melodos (490–556), imagines the garrulous stanzas of protest that would have burst out

6 I do not mean to say that the poetry explicitly hints at incest. However, it does at times dare a deep pleasure in the son that seems to contrast with Abraham's demonstration of love through maximal pain. And it is hard to approach the imagery of one body getting inside another, without evoking birth and sex, even when not explicitly figuring the act of sex.

7 The Greek word *κοντάκιον* refers to the shaft of a scroll. According to tradition, Romanos swallowed a scroll, like the prophets, and his compositions were divinely inspired.

from inside Sarah, had Abraham spoken to her—stanzas that have everything to do with her insides, and her profound umbilical attachment to her son:

The little life which I have left, I want to live it with him. After my death, if you so will, then do with him just as you have said. But don't take him from me, or grief will kill me; I beg you! We only just (barely) got him, when we no longer hoped that anything could come forth from inside of me. If we have only received him in order to lose him, will you cause me to conceive once more, will I suckle once more, and then, when life is ripe, give the fruit back to him who gave it to me?

ROMANOS 1964: 139–65, 146–49, stanza 8⁸

And:

Get away from me, immediately! *I'm* taking him in my arms, this child who caused so much pain in my belly, because I want to have my fill of him. If the one who called you needs sacrifices, let him have a sheep. Isaac, my child, if I see your blood split on the ground ... ah! it will kill me first, and only then kill you. Before you, your mother; after her, her little one.

ROMANOS 1964: 148–49, stanza 9

And, then, to Isaac:

But it is you who will close my eyes, you who, along with your children, will return me to the bosom of my fathers. It is you who will come to cry for me on the bed where you first saw the light. I will never be your chief mourner, for having heeded the words of the executioner (torturer) that is your father.

ROMANOS 1964: 150–51, stanza 11

Sarah wants to drink her fill, a lifetime's worth, of the son who emerged from her so tenuously, so impossibly, so lately. This woman becomes an exemplary case of Steiner's 'human' because she experiences the pain of the loss of her son as the loss of a very specific future: one in which her son will close her eyes and weep over her corpse on the very bed where he first emerged from

8 Please note that all translations are from my *rough* working translation of the text. Please do not cite without permission. I am currently working, with colleagues, on a more polished translation of this incredible text.

her body. This Sarah is so fully, poignantly human because she thinks in the future. Her pain comes from her umbilical attachment to Isaac's body, her desired substitution for his body at the place of sacrifice, and her imagination of the various futures, subjunctives, and alternative worlds at and after her death. In this she is a little bit like the theologians who see the meaning of the test as lying in the apocalyptic jeopardy of all futures. Kierkegaard rightly glosses the biblical text as threatening the universal, the whole world and the whole future concealed in 'Isaac's loins' (Kierkegaard 1985: 88), while Calvin writes even more sensationally of the jeopardy of salvation and all the worlds predicated on that salvation, as Abraham *almost* cuts Isaac and so almost 'cut[s] in pieces, or cast[s] into the fire, the *charter of his salvation*', with 'nothing left for himself [and the whole world] but death and hell' (Calvin 1847: 1.553). But unlike them, this Sarah thinks in terms of the microcosm, the minor apocalypse: the one precious body from her body, slipping through the thin membrane that separates his (impossible) life from his (impossible) death.

Abraham, thanks be to God, only 'kills' Isaac, but try telling that to Isaac's mother, or the mother as imagined in *Leviticus Rabbah*. When Isaac comes back down the mountain, Sarah asks him "Where have you been, *my son*?". (Note that pointed phrase, insisting that Isaac is *her* only, a fact that early Jewish and Christian Sarahs *will* persist in mentioning.) Isaac tells her everything that has happened and then she asks for confirmation: 'Woe unto *my son*!' [There's that phrase again.] Were it not for the angel you *would* already have been slaughtered?', to which Isaac answers, 'Yes'. Sarah is not asking whether Isaac was killed: past perfect. That would be silly. The angel did arrive, thank God, and Sarah knows this because her son is standing there before her. She is only asking for confirmation that this would have happened, and this is what she gets. But yet, weak, fond creature that she is, this alone, in *Leviticus Rabbah*, is enough to kill her—I mean, *really* kill her. The midrash ends with her screaming six times corresponding to six blasts on the shofar at Rosh Hashanah and concludes with a nicely qualified, cautious-fictional: '*They say that she died before finishing the six screams*' (*Leviticus Rabbah* 20.2). Sarah's six screams—falling away just before the end like a lament or *qinah*—offer an audible counterpoint to the already complex tones of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The shofar, which according to tradition comes from the ram of the *akedah*, is sounded in one long straight blast (*tekiah*); three medium wailing sounds (*shevarim*); and nine quick blasts in short succession (*teruah*). Sarah's screams are imagined as amplifying the tones of mourning and existential exposure already present in the *shevarim*. The *akedah* is heard, and performed, as a complex musical score: a confident proclamation of *zekut*, obedience, courage, devotion, safety and salvation in a strong bass masculine and a major

key—against soprano or alto mourning in a minor key. The death of Sarah amplifies the notes of the negative incredulous ('This is awful') in harmony and disharmony with the positive incredulous ('This is awesome: the whole world of Jewish redemption is founded and grounded on this').

Unlike their modern counterparts, early interpreters are acutely aware of the strange triptych-like structure of Genesis 21–23. Genesis 22 is not alone. It is not the only. The text sequence makes this very clear. At the centre: the act of blood sacrifice as 'birth done better' (Jay 1992: xxiv), from which women are excluded. And/but on the two side panels, as if to beg the question, two stories centred on women at the two ends of life. On one side, the death and mourning of Sarah. On the other side, nursing mothers: the birth and weaning of Isaac. It is as if the famous paintings by Rembrandt had somehow got attached to his numerous sketches of mother and child—and as we will see, Sarah does regularly become that most famous mother-and-child (Fig. 2).

In Genesis 21, we also find Sarah's discomfiting foreign-Egyptian-slave double and mimic: Hagar, the resident alien, the one who is sent away because her son, Ishmael, is *yizhaq-ing* (meaning 'playing', but also 'threatening-to-become-Isaac'). Ishmael is an alternative Isaac, a future subjunctive possibility of an alternative Israel, another surrogate family of Abraham; a sign of dangerously doubled worlds. Genesis 21 is all about expelling the one who *would have* inherited *had he not* been removed, and eliminating at least one subjunctive life, one parallel world. Crucially (and we never say this, though arguably this is



FIGURE 2 *Genesis 21—Genesis 22—Genesis 23: Birth and weaning—'Sacrifice'—Death of Sarah* (Rembrandt, *Mother and Child Seated in an Armchair* [n.d.]; Rembrandt, *Sacrifice of Isaac* [1655]; Marc Chagall, *Abraham weeping for Sarah* [1931])

the text's *main purpose*), *the almost-sacrifice makes Isaac, the almost sacrificed son, the true son*—while making Ishmael, the almost-son, the one who would have been, who might have been, but in the end was not. But the story of the other son and the other mother's expulsion is told in such a way as to deliberately beg the question of the surrogate Israel, there before us, sacrificed before us and for us. Alternative worlds and subjunctive worlds are not easily eliminated. Once the word is said, once the son is born, he and his mother are out there. And these ghostly subjunctive worlds remain, not least on the pages of our scriptures, as we narrate, again and again, the story of how they might have been, but were expelled.

The first room of Boddeke and Greenaway's Obedience exhibition is filled with Sarah. The first (and only) thing the viewer encounters is a gigantic video screen of a very solid Sarah, playing with Isaac, with a ghostly Abraham-god spectre in the background. The wall caption reads: 'What do I tell Sarah my wife? Tell her you are going to study Torah' (Figs. 3 and 4).

Early Christian and especially Jewish interpretations tend to read the sacrifice of Isaac in relation to the *après-sacrifice*, and particularly the shadow cast by Genesis 23, beginning 'And [or *But*] Sarah died', followed by Abraham's very expensive, excessive, and perhaps very guilty burial of his wife.⁹ In an ingenious gloss on the endless *waws* of biblical parataxis, the 'and' connecting Genesis 22 and 23 is read as a 'therefore', which can easily *tip into and out of a 'but'*. The most important thing that Sarah does in her Jewish afterlives is to die. Sarah's death is read as collateral damage: blood sacrifice with its inverted commas, or gloves, off. According to Bereshit Rabbah and Rashi, the sense is 'Therefore [But on the other hand] Sarah died from that very pain' (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 58.5). The death of Sarah adds force to the restraining hand of the angel and potentially turns it into a chastising hand. 'Don't do this Abraham. Naughty Abraham. And please don't try this at home'. Christian readings are less inclined to exploit Sarah's death as a direct consequence of the *akedah*, but they *do* read the sacrifice back through what happens after Abraham gets home. In a fifteenth-century Sacrifice first performed in Northampton in 1460 (Davis [ed.] 1970),¹⁰ when Abraham returns home, Sarah asks what her Lord has been doing, and Abraham decides to play an ill-judged guessing game. He has been sacrificing. Can she guess what? 'A living animal?' ('some quyk best?'). Oh yes, says Abraham: 'it was certainly a living animal. I may as well tell you

9 I explore the relationship between Sarah's death and the guilty narrative of her burial in Sherwood 2004.

10 All following citations are from Davis (ed.) 1970. All (rough) translations to modern English are my own.



FIGURES 3 AND 4 *Room 1*, Sarah. Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway, Gehorsam, Jewish Museum Berlin

lest you hear from someone else, for it will surely come out into the open'.¹¹ When Abraham confesses, in the most graphic language possible—'God commanded me to smite off Isaac's head and burn him ... until the angel came'—Sarah is distinctly unimpressed. She cries out '*Alas where was your mynde?*' ('Are you mad?'). Abraham's reply—'My mynde? Vpon the goode Lord on hy!'—is a comic but insufficient answer. And/but then, amazingly, Abraham himself confesses, '*Isaac hathe no harme, but in maner I was sorry*'. Isaac is saved, but guilt and regret remain.

We might have expected this medieval Sarah to have been the cartoonish opposite of true piety, like the silly harpy Mrs. Noah, a stock of medieval mystery cycles, or, at the other extreme, a kind of patient Griselda, another famous medieval type, praised for willingly giving up her children at her husband's command. Instead, she is more like the Griselda in Caryl Churchill's 1982 play, *Top Girls*, in which a fabulous encounter takes place among famous women from history, including Pope Joan and Griselda, in a 1980s restaurant. Like that Griselda, this Sarah ultimately affirms the sovereignty of her husband and her God but adds, 'I do think—I do wonder—it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to' (Churchill 1981: 27). The things that Griselda wishes her husband 'hadn't had to' include sending an officer to take her baby daughter, then later her baby son, telling her that the children are to be killed, but actually spiriting them away in secret as part of a convoluted test. The original Griselda makes no protest beyond asking that the children receive a proper burial. The modern Griselda starts to regret. In Sarah's case, the regret and doubt set in early, in 1460. Even more strikingly, her husband catches and echoes this in his 'sorry', his regret. Feudal structures do not necessarily promote obedience. There are many tones—including wry resignation and incomprehension—to the inevitable affirmation that, as Sarahs, Abrahams and Isaacs all proclaim in pre-modern performances of the sacrifice: 'The sovereign must have his way'.

11 Abraham: Wif, I went for to sacrifye;
but how trowe you, tell me verylye?
Sarah: Forsoþe, souereigne, I wot not I,
Paraurenture som quyk best.
A: Quyk? Ye forsothe, quyk it was!
As well I may tel you al the case.
As another that was in the same place,
For I wot well it wol be wist ...

DAVIS [ED.] 1970: 41 [LL.325–33]

In the Northampton play, all the characters enact some distance from the plot and the life that they inhabit—but Sarah and especially Isaac are the most distant. In the mountaintop crisis moment, Isaac says:

A, fader, do now what euer ye lyst,
 For of my modre, I wot wel, I shal be myst.
 Many a tyme hap she me clipt and kyst,
 But farewell now, for þat is do.
 She was wont to call me hir tresoure and hir store;
 But farewell now, she shal no more.
Here I shal be ded and wot neuer wherefore,
Saue þat God most haue his wille.
 Fader, shal my hed of also?

Father do whatever you desire
 But I know full well that my mother shall miss me
 Many times she has embraced and kissed me
 But farewell to all that for that is now over.
 She used call me her treasure and her store
 But farewell to all that—she shall say this no more
Here I shall be killed, without knowing wheretofore
Except that God's will must be fulfilled.
Father, will you also be chopping off my head?

DAVIS [ED.] 1970: 38 [LL.212–20]

Comedy creeps into the tragedy too early as Isaac asks, almost as an afterthought: ‘Will you also be chopping off my head?’ The line, which surely raised a smile, is deliberately out of step and out of time with the technically comic ending (the angel and the ram), which only comes much later in the text and in the play. Isaac’s dangerously comic question is out of sync with the dark tragedy of the sacrificial moment. It is uttered by a very un-Christ-like, poignantly human Isaac, cut off from his own fate and body. He submits, for he has no choice. But he is very clear that the sovereign script that commands him has nothing to do with his will and knowledge. (*‘Here I shal be ded and wot neuer wherefore / Saue þat God most haue his wille’* [Davis (ed.) 1970: 38 (ll.218–19)]). And, as if as a last act on his behalf of his own will, he tries to influence Abraham by summoning the guilty memory of the excluded mother and the agony of her future to at least gesture to other possible worlds and alternative possible futures—even at this late stage.

The Enabling Frame as a Safe Space for *Ethopoia* and Hypothetical Speech

Jewish and Christian traditions, which are sometimes hard to separate in some of these works, are differently secure.¹² Jewish texts are secured by the covenantal binding. In a number of midrashim, the 'son binds with all his heart' and the 'father binds with all his heart'. However, from within the secure framework of this secure covenantal *binding* to the text known as the *akedah*, Isaac says 'Father, bind my hands and feet, so that I might not curse you, or alternatively kick you', and worries that 'a [bad] word/a curse may issue from my mouth because of the violence and my dread of death'.¹³ Of course, Isaac does *not* kick his father, and he never says this word: he only 'says' it, mentioning the word he fears might rise involuntarily from him, like the verbal equivalent of that reflex 'kick'. The word that he thinks 'may' rise in his mouth never gets further than this 'may'. But if I tell you now, conditionally, what I *would* have said, *had* such and such been asked of me, the words still happen. I've said them and they are already out there, hanging in the air. Now that he's spoken the possibility and fear of them, the kick and curse are out there in that parallel world of what Isaac would have said, screamed and kicked had the sacrifice taken place.

The Christian framework provides perhaps even more security—or a different kind of security—with a four-cornered structure that holds the text securely, like a frame. These four corners are:

1. The non-negotiable sovereignty of God. Abraham is not choosing.
2. The tension between supreme, virtually divine spiritual athleticism on the part of Abraham, and the recoil of 'natural' feeling, which offsets the heroism of the trial.
3. Mystery, typology, and secrets. The potentially tragic test takes place within a fundamentally comic structure—not just because Isaac gets up

12 For example, Romanos's Kontakion is profoundly 'Judeo-Christian', with clear borrowings from midrash, and frequent Hebraisms in his koine Greek. Born to a Jewish family in either Emesa (modern-day Homs) or Damascus, and baptised as a young boy, Romanos served as Deacon in the Church of the Resurrection in Beirut and sacristan in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. His kontakion is full of midrashic details, including binding Isaac lest he struggle (Romanos 1964: 158–59, stanza 19) and Abraham's protest: 'Have you found something lacking in my sacrifice, so that you prevented me? Have I neglected something, in word or in deed ... ?' (Romanos 1964: 160–61, stanza 21).

13 See, for example, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Pesikta Rabbati*, the Palestinian Targum and *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* on Gen. 22.9.

from the altar, but because he is a type of the resurrection and all resurrected endings. The ultimate solidity of the frame comes from the fact that the wood of the woodpile is also the wood of the cross (and what could be more solid and secure than the wood of the cross?).

4. The ultimate security of a particular kind of future: a future that is neat, clean, singular, and no longer haunted by multiple possibilities, or dark and dangerous subjunctives. Within a Christian framework, this story has already been made New. The creativity of possibility is now channelled into dreaming in how many miraculous myriad ways this story anticipates that single future—or, to put it more accurately, how many lines can be drawn between the passion and this story, like the lines that a prism sends out a single point of light. (The Old Testament is the New Testament's shadow, but it is also a prism, creating numerous refraction lines from a single point of light). Crucially, this sure relation to certain singular future tense leaves writers with a freedom to create subversive possibilities around the Old Testament text, in its past and literal sense.

The security of the frame creates a safe space for complex polyphonic tones and subversive possibilities. Far from being ultimately thwarted by typology, as medievalist Allen J. Franzen argues (Franzen 2001),¹⁴ anti-sacrificial elements are frequently *heightened* and *enabled* by typology in pre-modern Christian texts. In the Northampton Abraham and Isaac, when Isaac first learns that he is to be the lamb—the very moment when the play is most securely anchored in the mystery—he protests:

Gentil fader, wot my modre of this
That I shal be dede?

DAVIS [ED.] 1970: 37 [LL.186–187]

'Does mum know about this?'. The sense is not simply 'Has she been told' but 'Had she been told, she would surely not have allowed this to take place'. This sense is echoed in Abraham's truly amazing reply: 'She? Mary, son, Crist forbade!' ('She? Mary's son, Christ forbid!'). Typology collides with curse and expletive. Medieval mystery plays often ran the risk of accidental comedy in

14 In contrast, and closer to my own argument, V. A. Kolve describes how these medieval dramas unexpectedly exploit the '*differences*' as well as the '*similarities*' between 'figure and fulfilment'; Clifford Davidson argues that the potential for 'mental hurt' is not stifled by typology; while Peter Braeger contends that the plays exploit '*typology as contrast*'. See Kolve 1966: 67; Davidson 1999; Braeger 1985.

the potential clash between high Christian meaning and its incarnation in all-too-human local characters. There are very amusing stories about the humour that resulted when the virgin was played by a local woman well known for her less than virginal past. But here, the script itself embodies the double tone. The sense is 'Christ no! Good god, no, I couldn't possibly tell her. Are you mad?' (This could only take place over her dead body.) But this expletive is also an expression of perfect typological correctness, for it is addressed to Isaac: the one who, according to the mystery, *is* Mary's son, Christ.

As well as amplifying Sarah's reaction après-'sacrifice', early Christian interpretation tends to worry what she would have said pre-sacrifice, had she heard of it. (And how could she not have heard of it? How could Abraham have prevented her hearing of it?) The possibilities are developed to a potentially shocking extent using the Greek rhetorical tradition of *ethopoiia*, or hypothetical speech. Gregory of Nyssa asks:

What words *would* she [Sarah] have used? [*Open inverted commas*] 'Spare what is of your own nature, man, otherwise your life will become the subject of an unpleasant story. This is my only child, Isaac, the only one born from my womb, the only one in my arms ... If you raise your sword against him, render me, unfortunate one, the service of using your sword first against me ... Let us be buried together, let the same earth cover our bodies, let the same tombstone tell our disaster. Then *Sarah's eye* will not have to see how ... Isaac is killed by the hands of his father.¹⁵

Her 'words'. In a homily that survives only in the Coptic, the fourth-century bishop, Amphilocius of Iconium amplifies the counter-voice of Sarah, while safely containing her words within the mind of Abraham:

What shall I do? It is impossible that Sarah should know [it]. For if I inform her she ... will rise up against me, weeping as if she were mad [and] saying to me [*again, open the floodgate of inverted commas*] 'What has happened to you?' Or 'Who has brought this thought into your mind? ... Where have you seen such [a thing]?' Or 'Who of your forefathers has made a sacrifice of this kind to God? Enoch pleased God, but he did not slay his son. Noah has pleased God but he did nothing like that. O man, refrain from this act. O old man, your mind has been upset, since he,

15 From Gregory's paraphrase of an iossyllabic Greek poem wrongly attributed to Ephrem of Syria, strophes 20–95, cited in Parmentier 1996: 63–64. I am grateful to Marije Altorf for her assistance with translation.

who called you, wants a sheep. He surely does not want a human being, does he?’

DATEMA [ED.] 1978: 278–79¹⁶

The question ‘He surely does not want a human being, does he?’ is also echoed by the Northampton Isaac who in another attempt to save himself asks: ‘Can’t your king be satisfied by any other kind of beast?’ (Davis [ed.] 1970: 176 [ll.174–75]). The only thing wrong with this question is that it is out of time, tense and sense with the biblical narrative. In Genesis 22, God will certainly be satisfied by another kind of beast—but only later. To anticipate this moment (in a ‘surely’, one of those subtle words used to convey something affirmed in spite of reasons to believe the opposite) is too proleptic, presumptive, even though, in the future, this is precisely what will be affirmed. Sarah and Isaac often speak or ‘speak’ the truth too early. In a text where timing is everything, their statements also seem subversive: at odds with, or out of time with, the text’s truth.

Sarah’s speech-in-the-mind-of-Abraham fills the vast abyss of silence between Gen. 22.2 and 22.3 where (absolutely unlike the Abraham of Gen. 21.11 who has just found the female/divine¹⁷ pressure to expel the other son Ishmael ‘very distressing’) this Abraham says nothing. The ‘voice’ of Sarah is also the voice-of-Abraham, ventriloquised as ‘Sarah’. He invents her. He projects her. She is his phantom. He imagines her protest. Where is agency? Who speaks? Where is the responsibility for this counter-voice, and where is the responsibility for ignoring and repressing it?

Isaac puts on the skin of the ram; Sarah becomes Isaac; and Abraham becomes Sarah—most queerly in Romanos Melodos’s Kontakion for the fourth Sunday in Lent. Amplifying the piercing and pointed command in Genesis 22, where God specifically tells Abraham to take the one he love, his ἀγαπητός, and burn him as a whole offering, Romanos’s God says, ‘Listen: Take the child of your body, the very child that you received as consolation in your old age, and for my honour cut his throat’. And then comes Abraham’s several stanza-long response, a response introduced by the caveat and disclaimer as if in capital letters: PLEASE NOTE THAT ABRAHAM DID NOT EVER SAY ANY OF THE WORDS THAT FOLLOW. Framing Abraham’s words with ‘Why did you not say ... ?’, the narrator poet gives voice for four passionate stanzas to a negative

¹⁶ All following citations are from this edition.

¹⁷ ‘Feminine/divine’ because the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar is initiated by Sarah. God and then, later, Abraham (but perhaps never the narrator) eventually follow (somewhat reluctantly) the woman’s will.

monologue, a work of apophysis, that articulates what could be said, but that can only be said under erasure or denial. Under these very curious 'speaking' conditions, Abraham protests that God should have called him murderer, for he shall be known not as father but murderer/assassin (σφαγὺς) for all eternity; that those who see him will take him for a madman, a lost spirit (ἐκστάντα); that he who is known for his hospitality to strangers, cannot possibly be so brutally brutal to his own son; that he cannot *possibly* bind the one whose swaddling clothes he unbound, the one he nourished, or cut off his infant babbling by his father's hand. Not only does this Abraham seem to have got hold of an advance copy of *Fear and Trembling*,¹⁸ but he appears to be turning into Sarah. There is something rather queer about these stanzas. The typical gender distribution of strength/reason and softness means that as Abraham starts to give voice (or not), to agony, his voice (or 'voice') assumes a higher pitch. Abraham turns symbolically female by the same (reverse) gender logic that leads some early female Christian martyrs to turn male. What happens next is even more surprising. We don't know how it happens (it is a Mystery, after all), but Sarah somehow *overhears* Abraham's words: the words that were never spoken, but that are or must have been out there somewhere on some frequency, where Sarah could somehow catch them. (Sarah is particularly good at tuning into words. She overhears the angelic visitors at Mamre who announce the birth of her child, Isaac, to Abraham, when she listens in from outside the tent [Gen. 18.10].) Sarah overhears words not meant for her (a cautionary tale for those who speak in secret, even if they speak apophatically or delete the words as soon as they are spoken). She is the witness to the strange resilience of words: words that exist and persist, even if they are negated, like Isaac's 'kick'. *Just as Isaac's 'sacrifice' is able to generate a nation and a Bible, even though it never happened*, Abraham's words produce a whole world of words, even though they were never spoken. In the magical logic of sacrifice and the subjunctive, Abraham's 'words' generate intimate, beautiful, defiant and deeply moving counter-assertions of the son's life:

Get away from me, immediately! *I'm* taking him in my arms, this child who caused so much pain in my belly ...

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- 18 Kierkegaard famously probes the tension between ethics and faith, murder and sacrifice, and the horror of this act once it appears within the sphere of the social and is seen by the neighbours. In the third problema, Johannes de Silentio asks: 'Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eleazar and from Isaac?' (Kierkegaard 1985: 98). Thus Kierkegaard explicitly raises the question of the secret that is so important to these pre-modern texts.

Leave the child with me, old man, he is mine; when he who has called you wills it, he will let me know. He announced to *me* by his angel my son's coming into the world: he will surely let *me* know if he wants his blood. I don't entrust/commit the child to you, I don't give him to you ...

You, my light; you, my dawn, the light of my eyes; you, the heavenly star that lights up my pride when I see you; oh my child, you appeared, as the belated fruit from inside the depths of me, a grape from a mature vine. No, your father will not extinguish you, he will not catch you ...

ROMANOS 1964: 148–50, stanza 9, 7, 10

This Sarah's seemingly subversive words are *true*, or will become so—but only later, when they are affirmed by the second voice and the angel's hand. They are not exactly not true, but they are not true insofar as they are proleptic, out of time with the text's tense and time. Sarah's voice is slightly off-beat, playing to a different time signature in a syncopated and slightly dissonant relationship to the official score. Her protection of Isaac, her single heavenly star (or, as the first Syriac *memra* puts it, the 'light of [her] very self') seems to stand in opposition to the 'necessary' acts of blood sacrifice justified by the dream of creating a starburst of outcomes, nations, securities, salvations, in the future tense. Echoing across the centuries, this sixth-century Syrian-Turkish-Christian-Jewish Sarah, who passed through and passed between an earlier Homs, Beirut, and Istanbul/Constantinople, seems to anticipate those contemporary war- and sacrifice-protestors who re-stage this story as a drama of child protection, and imagine Mama Sarah bringing Isaac back down from Mount Moriah (Fig. 5).

Romanos's Lenten poem is perhaps the most perfect illustration of the security of the frame. Each stanza, full of protest, concludes with a coda of



FIGURE 5

Sarah bringing Isaac back down from the mountain.
Hadassah, Women's Zionist Organisation of America,
front cover

affirmation of faith and the mystery: either 'For the saviour of our souls alone is good' or 'Praise to you, o merciful one, you who give all good things and save our souls'. The coda of salvation allows for a dissonant *and* affirmative relationship with the content of each stanza. There is more than a hint of a wry 'The sovereign must have his way'—on the human plane—as in the Northampton play. But the coda of salvation means that everything is held in the strong arms of the mystery, which is why so much can be said.

Romanos's poem is a game of two halves. In the second half, the first is retracted. Sarah, Abraham and all their words fall in around a new kind of orientation to the future. The passion will overcome any counter-voice, however passionate. Reorganised around this call back from the New future, Sarah, and all the recalcitrant words, fall into line. Emotions are now ventriloquised in the words of the New Testament. Mutating into Mary, Sarah placidly declares herself 'blessed' and presents the fruit of her womb to God (cf. Luke 1.48). The future is no longer haunted by multiple possibilities or dangerous subjunctives. It is neat, clean, grounded in the certainty, which Sarah now affirms, that the 'creator will not become the destroyer'.¹⁹ When Isaac returns, this Sarah greets him with the words of Simeon and the *nunc dimittis* (Luke 2.29–32), and his safe return is no surprise. In a very docile interpretation of the relationship between Genesis 22 and 23, Sarah proclaims that now she has seen the child return safely, she can die in peace. (This is a far quieter and more quietist reading of the relationship between Genesis 22 and Sarah's death than Rashi and the midrashim.) But subjunctive words cannot be exorcised, once they have been spoken/written. The first half of the poem, the twelve stanzas of pain and protest, still remain. Someone might repeat them, in a liturgical repetition. (In fact, we are meant to repeat these words, every time we recite these Easter homilies and liturgies.) Someone—as good at overhearing as Sarah—might still hear. Exactly like the biblical figures of Hagar and Ishmael, these old, first words are overcome or ostracised, at least by implication. They are replaced by better words; a second attempt at more polished, appropriate and perfect speech. But the first words are also spoken and retained and recorded, so that we always go on hearing the words, the family, and the disaster, that would have, could have been.

19 This is a different kind of 'God would not' to the 'God would not' of the distinctive modern reading, which makes the text into a ban on child sacrifice.

The Secret (Double Sense)

Many of these early Christian texts painfully exploit the at least double sense of the secret. The low (and dubious) sense of keeping secrets is held in ironic tension with the higher secret: ܠܐ; *rāzā*; μυστήριον, *mystērion*—words that are used and exploited very explicitly. *The full-blooded affirmation of the sacrifice as a mystery allows for a sometimes shocking interrogation of the dubious ethics of keeping secrets, in the lower, more pedestrian sense.* Held within the secure frame of the higher secret, Sarah's and Isaac's not-knowing and Abraham's (not to put too fine a point on it) lying can be explored to a terrifying extent. In the Northampton play, Abraham is clear that he must spirit the child away 'prevely' ('secretly'), lest Sarah oppose them. In the first Syriac *memra* (*Memra* 1) 'On Abraham and his Types', Abraham sets off with speed, and/but Sarah (still) sees them, and is 'seized with terror':

Sarah saw [them] and terror seized her, and she spoke as follows:

'Where are you taking *my only begotten*? Where is the child of my vows off to?

Reveal to me the secret of your intention, and show me the journey on which you are both going'

BROCK 1986: 108, *Memra* 1, LL.14–16

In *Memra* 2, clearly a close kin of the first homily, Sarah asks:

'Why are you sharpening your knife? Who do you intend to slaughter with it?

This secret today—why have you hidden it from me?'

BROCK 1986: 123, *Memra* 2, LL.15–16

And Abraham replies simply, 'This secret today women cannot be aware of'. Mount Moriah is no place for girls. The secret is a hard, steely, masculine place. I'm reminded of Søren Kierkegaard's use of Abraham's sacrifice as a type for a hard Christianity that is emphatically not for 'effeminate creatures and eunuchs' (Kierkegaard 1964: 102) or for couch potato, emasculated clergy who peruse the story of Abraham from their armchairs while puffing at their pipes and stretching out their legs (Kierkegaard 1985: 58). (For Kierkegaard, Mount Moriah becomes a kind of Everest—one that tries the cerebral and spiritual muscles to the limit, and sets in motion massive 'reflection possibilities', a mere tenth of which would be 'sufficient to disturb a feminine head' [Kierkegaard 1988: 270].) But as in *Fear and Trembling*, gender disequilibrium

is not sufficient to dispose with the ethical dilemmas of the secret. Sarah's protests of her exclusion are justified—and explored at discomfiting length. Why is Abraham splitting their oneness, demands the Sarah of the first *memra*. Before this, in everything—hospitality to 'supernal beings' or the hardship of exile—they have been 'as one person with a single love' (Brock 1986: 108, *Memra* 1, l.22).²⁰ Problematically expanding his biblical lies and half-truths, Abraham tells Sarah that he is simply going to slaughter a sheep—as he so often does. Her rejoinder is shocking:

*If it is a sheep you are wanting to see to, then be off and see to the sheep
and return;
leave the child behind lest something happen, and untimely death meet
him,
for I am being unjustly deprived of the single son to whom I have given
birth.
Let not the eye of his mother be darkened, seeing that after one hun-
dred years light has shone out for me.
You are so drunk with the love of God—who is your God and my God—
and if He so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without
hesitation.*

BROCK 1986: 108–109, *Memra* 1, LL.33–38, my emphasis.²¹

This Sarah does not believe her Abraham. She seems to fear the intense fervour for which later (modern) times would invent the term 'fanaticism'. At the moment when the angel intervenes, the poem makes the point that Abraham had to be restrained by the angel because his 'heart was on fire, burning to slaughter his son', and praises the fact that 'the old man is fervent (*rtaḥ*) for the slaughter' and his love for God is 'greatly enflamed (*etgawzal*)' (Brock 1986: 112, note to *Memra* 1, line 6). At least one other Syriac source (a Sogitha by Jacob of Serugh) describes Abraham as being 'drunk on the wine that flowed

20 Sarah elaborates further on their oneness, thus:

'You went off and fetched a calf, while I kneaded unleavened bread:
we were as one person with a single love when we received (those) supernal beings,
when they rested and gave us rest—and the child came as the result of their blessings'.

BROCK 1986: 108, LL.21–23

21 *Memra* 1. The second *memra* repeats the lines—'You are so drunk with the love of God—who is your God and my God—and if He so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without hesitation'—but suggests that Sarah is now giving them a more positive inflection. This second Sarah intuits the sacrifice to come, and wants to participate.

abundantly to him from Golgotha' (Brock 1986: 112, note to *Memra* 1, line 6). But in this Sarah's all-too-human words, the patriarch's drinking seems to slip out of the typological-redemptive into the metaphorical-pejorative. Abraham is as if drunk. He has lost his senses—leading to irresponsibilization, or perhaps in deliberately provocative contemporary language, 'radicalisation'. He would do anything for God. And there are many tones to the affirmation that 'Abraham would do anything for God'.

And it seems that he would even lie for God. In the very stripped down skeletal text of Genesis 22, where hardly anything is said, Abraham is twice called on to say too much. He is very deliberately forced to say things to Isaac and to his young men that are not true, but that are *not* not true. I and the lad will 'go yonder'; God will supply the 'ram'. Like dramatic irony, Abraham's two awkward speeches highlight different levels of knowing and unknowing and imply inverted commas of euphemism, or belief (or both, the text doesn't say). Abraham's parting words to Sarah in the first Syriac *memra* are far more disturbing, even as they are held in the assurance of the secret in the higher sense:

It is a lamb that I wish to slaughter, and give delight to my beloved son;
then I and your beloved shall enjoy another Lamb.
And I shall take with me two young men so that you will not worry over
Isaac,
(thinking) that I am handing him over to slaughter and inviting him to
be a whole-offering.

Typology and untruth, split, together. (The disjunction is like the strange conflation of typology and blasphemy/swearing in the Northampton Abraham's pious-expletive, on top of the mountain: 'She? Mary, son, Crist forbade!'.) The statement that the young men are being taken as Isaac's bodyguards, or Sarah's insurance, pushes this Abraham out far further on the limb of untruth than the Abraham of Genesis 22. Abraham becomes more like Jacob, or one of the other tricksters in Genesis. Like the old Isaac who will later be deceived by his son Jacob, Sarah is being made blind. She is duped. The *memra* very explicitly exploits the double sense of the secret. It frequently uses the key word *rāzā* ('mystery'), which is used in Syriac for any religious symbol (especially Old Testament 'types'), for sacramental rites and, in the plural, for the Eucharist (Murray 2006: 21). But, the poem also makes a point of the fact that Sarah—and Isaac—are being kept out of the secret in the lower case, more pedestrian sense. Developing a point that the Hebrew text hints at when it describes father and son as going יחד (together), the poet develops the difference and dissonance in this togetherness:

They went and came to the mountain where God rested
 and Abraham began to build the pyre that he had in mind,
 while Isaac was bringing along wood on his shoulders to Abraham;
 he was offering up a burnt offering without being aware of his actions.
 The child rejoices in his work, the old man rejoices in his task.
 Abraham built up the pyre while Isaac brought along the wood.
 The old man (was fervent) for the killing of Isaac, Isaac to the lamb that
 would come;
 old man and child, both readily became workers for God,
 though no agreement over what they were doing existed in the heart of
 each singly,
 and though their labours were not equal and their intentions were not
 in agreement—
 for the two of them, without being aware, were entirely different (in
 their expectations) ...

BROCK 1986: 109, *Memra* 1, LL.76–82

The split in the secret is equally disturbing when the Sarahs *believe* what their Abrahams so frequently tell them: that they are taking Isaac to sacrifice a sheep. The hasty exit by father and son is typically surrounded by ironic exhortations from Sarah. Reflecting her chilly north European rather than middle Eastern context, the Northampton Sarah exhorts Abraham to make sure that Isaac doesn't fall in the mud or catch a chill in the wind:

Than, sithe ye wol haue forthe *my* childe,
 Goode, loke that his horse be not too wilde,
 And sirs, wayte on hym, that he be not defilde
 With neither cley nor fen.

DAVIS [ED.] 1970: 35 [LL.120–24]

Since 'defilde' means 'violated' or 'destroyed', Sarah's anxiety unknowingly anticipates a fate far worse than falling in a little mud. Writing from the more balmy climate of Iconium or modern-day Konya in Turkey, Amphilochius imagines Sarah exhorting Abraham to look after the 'young child' with his 'delicate limbs' (Datema [ed.] 1978: 278 [ll.79–80])—a statement that ironically says much more than is intended, just as Abraham (quite deliberately) says much less. Believing her husband when he tells her that they are going to sacrifice a sheep as an act of worship, this Sarah gives deeply ironic detailed instructions to her son on how to *pray*:

Listen to me! Remember her who has borne you for God will hear you. May the Lord be for you a helper and a force, when you will go with your father, my son and the light of my eyes! Incline your ear a little to me and listen to my words, so that *I may teach you the way to pray to God....* First of all, bend your knees before him, and throw yourself down with your face to the ground. Place your hands behind your back, like someone bound, until the Good God looks down at you from heaven. Then utter a cry, like that of a sheep led to the slaughter, so that the Compassionate One above may hear you and send his mercy back with you, saying to your father, 'O patriarch, I have thus kept silence over the bloodless offering of your son'. And now, greet your mother and give her a kiss on the mouth. Go with your father and return also with him in peace. For I trust that God will guide you and bring the two of you back again to me. He who gave you to me as a gift in hope, and has now called you in hope, will bring you safe back to me.

DATEMA [ED.] 1978: 280 [LL.90–107]

Sarah is kept out of the secret. But, exactly like Old Testament words and stories in general—in fact, as a kind of type of Old Testament words and stories in general—her words say so much more than they know or intend. Sarah's unknowing words pre-figure the sacrifice that she knows not. Sarah's instructions become ironically proleptic and prophetic as we (the audience, but emphatically not Sarah) get to see the 'old man' binding Isaac hand and foot, bending his trunk backwards, pushing his hands behind him, and grasping the hair of his head—in a literalisation of Sarah's metaphorical parallel world, her 'as if'.

The oscillation between Sarah's 'as if' and Abraham's very literal sacrifice seems to deliberately evoke the tension between sacrifice and prayer that we find in the Hebrew Bible and the development of Jewish and Christian practise, where literal sacrifice co-exists with the transformation of sacrifice into ethics, liturgy and prayer as bloodless sacrifice, the 'cows of the lips' (Hos. 14.2). Kept of the secret, Sarah understands sacrifice as prayer. In Abraham's literal act, her idea of prayer is reverse-engineered. But Sarah's misunderstanding anticipates what really happens in Genesis 22, when sacrifice is transmuted into 'doing this' and 'not withholding', and blood sacrifice is transmuted into a script for a sacrifice. Abraham's act and Sarah's unwitting metaphorisation of the act, are *both* true statements about the truth of sacrifice in this double-handed text.

The double sense of the secret allows for a richly productive paradox. Because this must happen, words of critique and protest (from Sarah, and Abraham, and Sarah-in-the-mind-of-Abraham) cannot be spoken. In fact, Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Chrysostom specifically make the point that,

had Sarah spoken, the mystery might not have been fulfilled. But at the same time this statement ascribes extraordinary power to Sarah's 'speech'. If they could have potentially aborted the sacrifice, and prevented the fulfilment of the mystery, then what kind of words could these—must these—have been? *Sarah's putative words are put in the extraordinary position of having, by their very force, to extinguish the possibility of their ever really being.* Because Sarah's protest must be forever 'moot', it can therefore be anything but mute (m.u.t.e). Because they never are, these hypothetical words can be maximally persuasive. *And redemptive.*

When Sarah becomes Mary, the typological framework saves the sacrifice, but sometimes in risky and unexpected ways. Mary is the co-redemptrix. She is understood to have consented voluntarily to the crucifixion, and to have fully identified with the son in his sufferings. And/but she is conceived as the most devoted and tender of all mothers, who could not but be out of step and time with her son's journey to Jerusalem. This leads to beautifully complex synco-pated liturgies, and theologies, and deep dramas of pathos, where the mother resists, even as she mirrors, her son's sacrifice unto death.²² There are all kinds of cadences and tones to the figure of Mary. In Romanos's *Kontakion*, Sarah becomes Mary the submissive mother who presents the fruit of her womb in a parallel sacrifice. In *Amphilocius's* homily, Sarah becomes the intercessor for Isaac and humanity. At the moment of reprieve, God declares that he is sparing Isaac in honour of Abraham's obedience *and* because Sarah 'has not ceased to beseech me about him' with intercessory prayer. Similarly, in the first Syriac *memra*, Sarah becomes the 'Mother of All Mercies'. The two hands become gendered: on the one hand, compassion or *raḥmē* (Sarah-Mary); on the other justice, *kēnūtā* (Abraham). Right hand and left hand. No hand dominates. Both attributes (or *מדות*) both hands, are weighted as equally divine.²³ More extremely, Sarah can become the *mater dolorosa*, the Sarah of the pieta, with redemptive power lying in her suffering and pain.

In the first of the two Syriac *memre*, Sarah is a Clytemestra figure, justly raging at her Agamemnon, and also very specifically, the *mater dolorosa*. She swoons and almost dies over what her God-drunk husband may have accomplished. And the homily ends: *'Because of the suffering of his mother, in your compassion, give us what we ask'* (Brock 1986: 112, *Memra* 1, l.184). Here, the text of Genesis 22 is hinged up against the triptych panels of Genesis 21 (the mother-and-child) and Genesis 23 (the death of the mother). The equation between Sarah and

22 For Mary's poetic non-compliance in medieval literature, see Woolf 2006: 71.

23 As Brock notes, there is a clear relation to the Jewish concepts of the divinity balanced between the two *מדות* of mercy and justice. See Brock 1986: 114.

the Virgin allows those panels to be developed as a nativity and a pieta. The sacrifice is now surrounded, and in a sense subverted by, the nativity and the pieta. The second voice tells Abraham:

Because you have offered up your son as a whole offering, I too will offer
up Mine to the cross;
if you have not spared your child, neither will I spare Mine.
You have performed as a human an action that is too hard for humans;
I, then, as God (will perform) an action even harder than yours.
Anyone who slays his own son is greater than both angels and men.
Since you have loved me to the full, so My love for you is unbounded.

BROCK 1986: 110, *Memra* 1, LL.117–22

The binding is affirmed as a superhuman ‘wonder’. It leads typologically *and causally* to the unleashing of God’s ‘unbounded’ love. And/but the second voice that aborts the sacrifice is described as the voice of *Justice*, to whom the hosts have made supplication on behalf of Isaac (while *Compassion* flies to earth on the wings of prayer, making sure that Isaac comes to no harm). And/but Sarah almost dies when Isaac tells her what might have happened. ‘Pangs grip her’, she ‘doubles up in fright’, and she collapses, at death’s very door (Brock 1986: 111, *Memra* 1, ll.172–73). And/but Sarah declares to Isaac: ‘The fingers which fashioned you in my womb / have now delivered you from the knife’ (Brock 1986: 111, *Memra* 1, l.175). The ‘And/buts’ mount. And/but the final prayer concentrates salvation not on superhuman sacrifice, but the ‘grievous pain’ of the mother. ‘*Because of the suffering of his mother, in your compassion, give us what we ask*’.

The original text of Genesis 22 is delicately and precariously balanced between two words and two hands: ‘Offer your son as a burnt offering’ and/but ‘Do not lay your hand upon the lad’. The two forces can be perfectly balanced in acts of interpretation, though this is exquisitely difficult to pull off perfectly in practice. The scales tend to tip in one direction or the other. In the sphere of poetry and liturgy—not doctrine or argument—the ambiguity and empathy can go either way. Sarah can be the force of natural compassion, outweighed and outranked by the robust performance of Abraham. This is arguably how the scales tip in Gregory and Pseudo-Chrysostom, and in Romanos and Amphilochius, *although Sarah’s hypothetical speeches are never eradicated*. The second Syriac *memra* arguably tips the other way. Abraham is right—and/but he is also guilty, love-drunk—and it is the force of life, faith, intercession, represented by ‘Sarah’, that ultimately prevails, and that *should* prevail. There is a temptation, and perhaps not a bad one, to come to rest and to find peace in

Sarah's embodiment of anguish and mercy and the transmutation of sacrifice into prayer.

Nachleben; Afterlives of Futures

So what happened in the futures of these futures? To cut a very long story short, the world of possibility was contracted and simplified when Genesis 22 became a printed and widely distributed text: the 'word of God', to be discussed in pamphlets, manifestos—and footnotes. The question of probability, possibility and truth is first and foremost a media question. There is a world of difference between one almost-lost handwritten manuscript of a fifteenth-century local drama, or Calvin's *Commentaries*, or Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Both the Reformation and the Enlightenment took all these subjunctive possibilities and possible worlds, and (in different ways) pared them down to a single decision between worlds.

The pre-modern texts all acknowledge and exploit the fact that Abraham's test was very, very difficult. It is the ultimate trial for athlete Abraham, who goes out to the extreme edge of possibility, the place where only the supreme heroes can go. The condensed subjunctive of the Reformation introduced a new modality of possibility. The text was no longer simply very, very difficult. It was impossible. The difficult and the impossible only appear to be close.

Ramping up the crisis of the future to fever pitch, Calvin and Luther gathered up all the subjunctive possibilities and pared them down to one sensational drama of what would have, could have happened, had there not been salvation by faith. The text became the equivalent of Hollywood disaster movie: *The Command Against the Promise*, narrated by Luther and Calvin as if in the sonorous voice-overs of Don Fontaine. The whole drama was focussed on the text *qua* text, as constructions of grammar that, in this case, do not and could never make earthly sense. Because God's *command* to sacrifice Isaac was absolutely opposed to his own *promise* of the future in Isaac, it was a paradox, an oxymoron, a catachresis, 'a counter assault of the word' against itself (Calvin 1847: 1.561–62). What was being thrown into the fire was not Isaac (Isaac was now entirely incidental), but the word of God represented metonymically by this highly self-conscious text. As Calvin put it in the strap line for *The Command Against the Promise*—or *Abraham, the Movie*—Abraham was being commanded to 'cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the *charter of his salvation*' leaving 'nothing' for himself and the whole world 'death and hell' (Calvin 1847: 1.553). What would have and could have happened is nothing less than total apocalypse: the burning up of all worlds, all futures, all life, all afterlives, all

resurrection: a loss of all salvation which depended entirely on the Word and the 'the quasi-sacramental notion of the efficacy of the text' (Preus 1991: 446). The only thing that saves the Reformation subject from this horror is not the angel (who is just as incidental as Isaac), but the faith of Abraham mirrored in the faith of the reader, who learns to read according to the 'grammar of the Holy Spirit' (Bielfeldt 1990).²⁴ The complete disaster that would have happened is avoided through a reading lesson: learning to read in faith.

In the Reformation drama of the impossible, Genesis 22 started on a new and inexorable path to a narrowed down future: a future about decisions and acts of reading as acts of faith. It was only a matter of time before this text became the scriptural battleground for a showdown between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, or deism—better understood as the supreme belief in morality, and the absolute equivalence between morality and the divine. For the 'deists', the very command to sacrifice the son turned the God of the text into, in Kant's words, an 'illusion' (*Tauschung*): an impossibility (Kant 1979: 115; Kant 1970: 174). Genesis 22 became a test case for the deist κρίσις (krisis) and the sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'. Newly confining the course of the probable, the deist Thomas Morgan pronounced in 1737: 'It *may be probable enough*, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty ... to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is *absolutely incredible*' (Morgan 1740: 3.133–34). In *footnotes* written in the 1790s, Kant was emphatically clear that Abraham 'should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, an apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never could be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven"' (Kant 1979: 115; Kant 1970: 174). The range of the future, the subjunctive, was now far narrower and also more sensational than it was able to be in Romanos, Amphilochius or the Syriac *memre*. Many of the ancient texts imagine Abraham worrying about how the neighbours will see him. The Enlightenment readings, in contrast, present authors who shape 'truth' with an eye on the dangers of this text for society. These readers are acutely aware of the social persona of the author, the public owner of the written texts, and his

24 Bielfeldt argues that the grammar of heaven is articulated through the clash of earthly categories. The grammar of the Holy Spirit does not obey the normative rules of grammar, which is why it can break through the grammar of life which dictates that we are born and, at the end of the paragraph or sentence, die.

relation to truth and *plausibility*²⁵ (a word that reveals the social scene of truth through its origins in Latin *plausibilis* ['acceptable', 'deserving applause']).

Organised around neologisms such as credibility or plausibility, the probable futures and alternative worlds around Abraham's sacrifice contracted. It is at precisely this point, in the early eighteenth century, that we find the first appearances of the ironic reading (when God said 'Sacrifice your son' he *really* meant the opposite²⁶), or textual critical solutions designed to 'render the story *reasonable* and *credible*' (Morgan 1740: 2.128). Under the helpful auspices of 'the Enlightenment Bible' (Sheehan 2004), the biblical scholar could concentrate questions of plausibility into micro-studies of geography, philology and source criticism, and use standard discourses of the more or less probable to ignore the massive elephant in the classroom: the old question of the incredible and outrageous divine command. The subjunctive fell out of fashion in a regime of truth ruled by the indicative: the statement of objective facts. Spurious and tendentious *futures* were lost—and far from accidentally—in a turn to historical criticism, centred on scholars' devoted concentration on the past.²⁷ It is far from accidental that biblical scholarship became *so far removed* from poetry, literature and drama. Henceforth the scholar would use modest nods to the modal (e.g. 'it could certainly be argued that') to modify a fairly confident indicative, with his²⁸ whole idiom moving as far as possible away from subjunctives and optatives, and all their connotations of wished-for futures, opinions and desires. Strange and lost futures could now only return in

25 'Plausible' in the sense of 'having the appearance of truth' first appeared in English in the 1560s, derived from the Latin, *plausibilis*. 'Implausible' first appears in the 1690s. The terms 'credible' and 'incredible' were first used in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

26 'God gave the command, not with an intent that it should be obeyed, but that he might take an occasion from it, to shew to Abraham, and to all his posterity, the unfitness of all human sacrifices' (Chubb 1730: 228).

27 If previous work I have argued that we could and should risk the hypothesis that ancient interpreters were freer to carry out riskier and more adventurous readings because they were *free* from those large acts of representation by which moderns identify as believers or non-believers (or carefully calibrated gradations of these categories) and publicly sign and take responsibility for printed readings published in their name. See further Sherwood 2012: 333–74, esp. 366–74.

28 See my earlier comments on 'man'. I don't think I would be helping the cause of objective history as an accurate representation of the facts if I were to pretend that the representatives of traditional University biblical scholarship (understood as objective history) have been equally male and female. Of course I could insert a 's/he' as a wished for, optative future—and a nod to the recent pluralisation of voices—but I think that would obfuscate the historical point.

the retrieval of lost premodern texts—always in danger of simply ending up in that sideroom of biblical scholarship, the one reserved for all the whimsies and incidental sideshows of what is now regularly called ‘reception history’. Alternative audacious scenarios of what could have, might have happened—or speculations about ‘What must God have said to Abraham ... What could and should he have told him?’ (Derrida 2001: 56)—were left to those we think of as ‘philosophers’ and ‘writers’, in the realm of literature: figures such as Kierkegaard, Kafka and Derrida.

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Curational Reflections: On Rhetorics of Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Scholarship¹

Davina C. Lopez

I don't like the word 'poetry,' and I don't like poetry readings, and I usually don't like poets. I would much prefer describing myself and what I do as: I'm kind of a curator, and I'm kind of a night-owl reporter.

TOM WAITS, cited in *Cromelin* 1976



Impressions

I have long held a fascination with Trajan's Column. This most arresting of Roman monuments, still standing in the Roman Forum after nearly two millennia (Fig. 1), puzzles me, and not just because of its endurance in the Roman landscape or its suggestive shape. If images are a mode of communication, and I am committed to the idea that they are, then this Column offers a compelling site for thinking about communicating with pictures, and how it might be a picture itself. A cursory engagement with Trajan's Column, including modern literature about the monument, suggests that through more than 2,500 individual figures, all unique, the story of the Roman conquest, destruction, and annexation of the barbarian Dacian nation—itsself a fairly advanced and, importantly, probably wealthy civilization—is told from start to finish in a series of reliefs that begin at the base and wrap around the column to the top. This type of visual program is perhaps reminiscent of Egyptian obelisks or earlier Roman “Jupiter Columns,” most of which have been found in Germany and

1 This essay was composed for the 25th anniversary of *Biblical Interpretation*, during a time in the United States when the rhetorics and politics of division, blame, and emotionality appear to have trumped critical thinking, solidarity, and empathetic transparency. Our field is shaped by these discourses. For intellectual companionship in deliberating some of these issues I am grateful to members of the 2016–17 Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion Mid-Career Workshop on Teaching Civic Engagement. As well, I appreciate Tat-siong Benny Liew's abundant patience and editorial compassion.



FIGURE 1 *Detail of Trajan's Column, Forum of Trajan, Rome. Seen from a bridge and through a camera zoom lens, the specific details on the Column are still difficult to "read" in "order"*

PHOTO BY DAVINA C. LOPEZ

depict gigantomachies and other allegorical scenes wrapped around a shaft.² Trajan's Column appears to have been alluring enough to inspire victory columns long afterward, across the Mediterranean and even in the United States.

Debate exists among art historians about how to approach Trajan's Column, what its original function was, and what the monument itself signifies. As well, questions about the continuous reliefs that spiral up toward the top persist: how should we understand these images? What are we supposed to see here? One trajectory suggests that the scenes represent events that actually happened, and that these images provide a window onto ancient reality; after all, the Column is thought to provide one of our most extensive sources about Roman military action and personnel. Scholarly consensus about the reliefs appears to be that these scenes are there to be read, and read in the same order that might be afforded a continuous narrative, from the beginning of the first Dacian campaign at the base to the end of the second campaign at the top.³

² For a contextualization of the Jupiter Columns, see Woolf 2001.

³ For a succinct discussion of this visual problem see Huet 1996.

It may very well be that the designer(s) of the monument intended the images to be read that way, as an ancient comic strip of sorts. The main problem with Trajan's Column is that, while it might seem to relate a linear and coherent story, no average viewer on the ground can really make out what is going on with any consistency without walking around in circles, staring up at blurry and nearly invisible images at a dizzying height, so as to "follow" the story of the Dacian wars and Trajan's victory for the Roman empire in the scene-by-scene order that contemporary scholars propose.⁴

Trajan's Column, and others like it (such as the nearby Column of Marcus Aurelius), does not lend itself easily to linear reading strategies. To address this, one theory proposes that those ancient viewers who had access to the upper levels of the library that may have surrounded the Column in the Forum of Trajan could make out the visual programming on some of the upper registers; this, however, is a contestable suggestion that does not solve the problem of having to read the narrative continuously in order to get a sense of its progression. As it stands, the ordinary person looking at the column in the ancient world, or today for that matter, would observe a panoply of images of various scenes, peoples, and locations, none of them arranged in a linear manner and all of them flowing into one another, coming up out of the ground and into the sky. Add to this the probability that the entire column was painted in color (as many such ancient monuments were)⁵ and that there might have been metal weapons protruding from multiple sculpted hands, and the imagery becomes more complicated. Undoubtedly the major theme of the column is the defeat of the barbarian Dacians by the imperial Roman forces (albeit with the aid of a significant number of non-Romans). Yet, save for the oversized personifications of the Danube river at the column's base and the goddess Victory, relatively few images offer a key to narrativizing the Column. Other than that, viewable in multiple positions on the column from multiple vantage points on the ground is Trajan himself—always surrounded by a crowd—doing things such as addressing his troops, receiving prisoners, or making sacrifice.

Since the Column was and is a public monument, this means that anyone could see it in its location outside, and it stands to reason that what people would see depended upon who they were or what social position they occupied. For all of the visual busyness on the Column, one element that does stand out is that most of the figures are anonymous non-Romans; this adds a peculiar dimension to this Roman victory monument erected in a city full of ethnically

4 See Clarke 2003; and Lopez 2011.

5 On Trajan and color, see Bandinelli 2003; on color on ancient monuments generally, see Brinkmann et al. (eds.) 2007.

non-Roman people. Indeed, all viewers may have noted the abundance of images of non-Romans helping the Romans defeat the enemy Dacians on the Column. The story on Trajan's Column, if there is indeed one, would be different depending if the viewer were natively Roman, Greek, Dacian, or "other" (Persian, Judean, and so on). Elites may see conquest and assimilation of enemy nations or the will of the gods. Non-elites and other "outsiders" may see non-Romans fighting with Romans to defeat a common enemy as a means to serve and honor Trajan, himself of non-Italian ethnic origin. As John Clarke has noted, "for the foreigner, slave, or former slave looking at the Column of Trajan, the abundant images of outsiders—both Dacians and non-Roman soldiers—constituted a visual digest of the steps such a person took from being outside the Roman system to being a part of it" (Clarke 2003: 38). That the visual program on Trajan's Column could serve as such a "digest" about the process of becoming Roman is predicated somewhat on its readability. It is indeed intriguing to consider how viewers of different social positions may have understood specific segments they could see, segments which more often than not featured non-Romans doing things for Trajan and Rome, rather than presupposing that they could read the monument linearly and as a whole. And like much Roman imperial art, a question to keep in mind is whether the visual program on this monument signifies history as it happened, as the Romans wanted the population to accept as "true," as a series of events with mythological import, or something else entirely.

Trajan's Column could be seen as a monument that dwells between myth and history, both providing details about specific events and allegorizing peace, war, belonging, and civilization. To be clear, my understanding of myth and history is not oppositional, as both myth and history are stories that authorize power and serve to order the world and the place of humans in it. I would say that monuments, or monumental narratives, such as Trajan's Column serve to idealize social relations and the order of the world in both the past and the present. They portray the world as it might be, rather than as it is. As such, these narratives also play an important ideological function: namely, the portrayals of the world embedded therein render that world believable and natural. The rhetorical task of narrative is to persuade audiences of the naturalness of "the way it is." Such narratives are desirable, as they provide audiences with a sense of security and stability concerning the world, concerning history, concerning humanity. And it is precisely when we realize that the world is a profoundly unstable and insecure place that we desire the narrative of stability and security—the "orderly account"—all the more. In projecting stability onto monuments such as Trajan's Column, we are able to imagine the stability of the Roman Empire and to read ourselves into that stability.

Whether we can truly assign monuments the ability to do the ideological work of providing the stability and security we might desire is contestable, of course. Monuments like Trajan's Column do not do anything on their own without viewers. In order for ideology to be effective, readers must do things with narratives. It is critical to remember that any engagement is ultimately not only about the narrative itself, but about the relationship we desire to have with a narrative, its contexts, and its histories of interpretation. Herein lies the core of methodological consciousness, transparency, and responsibility in biblical scholarship. Indeed, any manner of scholarship we aim to conduct—"traditional" or "innovative"—is ultimately about us, our desires, and the relationships we cultivate with the subject matter, ourselves, each other, the field, and the world. With such desire for relationship in mind as a critical aspect of thinking about methodological issues in biblical scholarship and what difference it might make, it is worth considering the example of Trajan's Column, and why that monument matters, or how we might think with the monument metaphorically in order to explore some methodological issues. In doing so, I hope to further highlight some suggestive elements that might arise when we endeavor to ask methodological questions about what it is we do as biblical scholars, for whom we do it, as well as what difference it makes to pose such questions in the first place in our late-late-neoliberal capitalist, post-"facts" cultural moment—questions that are important to journals like *Biblical Interpretation*.

Ordering Things

We should bear in mind that the various ordering practices that have been deployed in the service of desiring a potential linear narrative have resulted in our seduction by that very possibility. Modern technology, including photography and casting—and the photographers and casters—have helped us suppose that Trajan's Column tells the story of Roman imperial "acts" in the northern territories. In modern history, the story of Trajan's victory has been critical to statecraft; Napoleon famously wanted to bring the Column from Rome to Paris and appropriate it as part of his triumphal story, but abandoned that plan in favor of ordering his own version of that monument to be cast in bronze from melted-down enemy weapons. Decorated with spiraling reliefs and topped with a statue of Napoleon, that monument still stands in Place Vendôme. Attempts to make sense of the images on the Column have found numerous mechanisms of aid, from the modern effort to make casts of the reliefs

and ordering them in museums to taking photographs of the images with telescopic lenses that provide a “bird’s eye” view inaccessible to the average person on the ground. The photographed images are also printed in catalogues or exhibited in essays or even books (as in my own work on the subject). And now, with digital humanities projects soaring skyward like Trajan’s Column itself, we find these images, diagrammed and mapped, perhaps even in 3D, in interactive displays, and in online databases.⁶ And in this modern framing of the Column, one cannot ignore the importance of state interest and investment in the ordering process. For example, in his Museum of Roman Civilization, Benito Mussolini set up the reliefs in a special area (Fig. 2), where they were a central



FIGURE 2 *Trajan's Column, casts of the reliefs placed in "order" and narrated via dual-language placards explaining each of the 155 cast "scenes"*
MUSEO DELLA CIVILTÀ ROMANA, ROME

6 An interactive graphic wherein one can read the Column is found at National Geographic 2015.

attraction of his never fully realized fascist EUR (Esposizione Universale Roma) neighborhood, itself drawn architecturally from the Roman imperial tradition of city planning and incomplete on account of the war. The casts of the reliefs, being grafted on to the grand narrative about Roman imperial history that stretches from the present all the way back to the founding of Rome itself, remain there.

Methodologically, what I perceive in Trajan's Column *in situ*, and perhaps especially in the modern museum version of the reliefs arranged in order, are two different versions of *curation*. A turn to curation, rather than "interpretation," raises a series of interesting questions for the task of making sense of objects through narration. As a means of consciously identifying, sorting, organizing, and presenting objects to an audience, curation is a form of meaning-making. The process of curation decides what is canonical and non-canonical, what is valuable and what is not valuable, what is relevant and irrelevant, where we should put our attention and what we should ignore or maybe even shun, what we should consume and what we should consider passé. Indebted to the modern art world, but with a much older etymology (think Roman *curatores*, bureaucrats responsible for public projects), curation is a form of "caretaking" that refers to the process of arranging and editing cultural materials for public view. A curator, the one who does the curation, functions as a creator, imparter, and custodian of value, at least in part by providing a narrative through which the edited collection of objects can be understood and to which it might engender an audience's response. The curator of art became an especially important figure with the rise of modern, unconventional forms of art—performance, abstract expressionism—that might not have been readily intelligible to viewers. Curators, then, render the unintelligible intelligible, transforming the unstable ("weird stuff that is not art") into a stable and coherent narrative ("the avant-garde") that audiences can understand and, perhaps more importantly, tastefully and artfully consume (Balzer 2014: 1–12). Curation, as a mode of ordering things, authorizing narratives, and making meaning, has also entered into our neoliberal capitalist cultural lexicon and practice as a means of enhancing brand narratives and cultivating brand loyalty. Curation establishes relationships between objects—consumable products—and potential consumers. In a world of seemingly endless choices, curation makes culture seem more personal, more local, more diverse, *and* more coherent. From art exhibits to grocery stores, from craft breweries to Instagram accounts and Facebook pages, much of life can now be—and is—curated. Thinking with the concept of curation allows one to locate and understand the manufactured nature of arranging and displaying information towards communicating a particular

end, all the while establishing the value of those materials in relation to one another *and* nurturing a certain belief or stirring particular emotions in the viewing audience.

In other words, curation highlights the human relational process of classification and canonization, attending to what Michel Foucault famously calls “the order of things” (Foucault 1970). Foucault notes that particular historical situations produce specific conditions of truth and knowledge, as well as precise means of ordering and classifying what is knowable and acceptable. Curation is in some sense modern, and linked to our specific historical moment and economic context. We happen to live in a moment where virtually anyone can be a curator; social media, for example, is a vast stage or gallery where people might curate themselves and are explicitly encouraged to do so. That said, and as Foucault would have it, humans are classifying animals even as the modes of classification might change over time and across space.

Attention to curationism, as a means both to locate relations of power and expose the human hands at work in culture-making and to reflect on the desire that ordering things creates, can also be applied to literature and beyond. It is critical to note that ways of organizing and disseminating knowledge in academic settings have also participated in manufacturing stable, coherent narratives and promoting their desirability. The disciplines of art history and archaeology, in narrating and reifying their methods, aims, and goals through curating monuments like Trajan’s Column, have in effect contributed to such desires for coherence and stability. They have done so by insisting that monuments like the column can be “read,” demonstrating that claim by arranging the pictures so as to accord with a narrative rendering, making these readily accessible for intellectual and cultural consumption by researchers and students alike, maintaining that such an endeavor will lend more intelligibility to the ancient world as a whole. Such disciplinary work may in fact produce a narrative where none may exist, manufacture desire for the civilizing discourse of “the field,” and stabilize the identities of readers and researchers as knowing subjects, all the while occluding the difficulties, complexities, and assumptions involved in knowledge production. We therefore have a professional disciplinary apparatus that includes the discovery of a “visual language” of the Column, machinery that aims to corroborate the details of the war story with literary sources and to generate multiple perspectives on the historical veracity of these acts of Trajan. All of this, it is important to note, is produced by the apparatus used to organize and arrange the data rather than as something that is inherent to that data itself. This process, of course, is not unique to art history and archaeology. It is, rather, part of any disciplinary structure and the

concomitant principles and methods of that discipline to position knowledge-making as simple and self-evident.⁷

I observe that a turn to curation as a methodological lens and metaphor is helpful precisely because it illuminates something of the very human, very messy process involved in selecting, displaying, arranging, distinguishing, authorizing, and validating materials. One can look at monuments such as Trajan's Column as curated, and curated differently depending on whether we are thinking about the Column in its ancient curatorial context or its modern one. One can also look at texts in and from the ancient world as types of curations, whether that would be the Book of Acts or Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* or Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* or Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, all of which are themselves involved in the arrangement of data toward specific rhetorical ends and for specific audiences—and all of which have subsequently been deemed canonical or relevant for understanding history in one way or another. Curation, as a heuristic, moves us beyond genre to ask questions about what is on display, why it might be arranged and narrated in the way that it is, what is at stake in such arrangements and emphases, and what is validated or not-validated in the process. The same approach, to be sure, can also be applied to biblical scholarship and its divergent methodologies. With curation and curationism in view, I would urge that we understand processes and products of biblical scholarship as curatorial, that is, as entangled in the processes of careful selection, arrangement, and value-assignment by people—the (pro)curator, expert arranger, scholar, documentary film producer, journalist—for specific audiences and publics. Regarding contemporary biblical interpretation, as scholars have pressed forward over the last quarter-century, one might observe that the proliferation of ever-more specific methods, or “reading strategies,” and their consolidation and branding as “new” and “innovative” is a product of curationist impulses. Part of that consolidation has included something of a rhetorical differentiation and turn away from “traditional” biblical scholarship. I would argue, however, that a curatorial impulse is actually what “traditional” and “innovative” approaches to biblical literature share in common: at heart, they are both invested in and motivated by a desire to render a particular, albeit not identical, narrative regarding the relationship amongst the diverse materials selected for display and to hail into being an audience to value and validate this rendering.

7 Jonathan Z. Smith called the disciplinary process of narration and concealment “the necessary lie” that scholars tell students and colleagues; see Smith 2007.

Curating the Present through the Past

In the recent past of biblical interpretation, one can detect copious examples of temporal-territorial claims to newness and innovation that are resonant with curationist impulses. To be sure, arguments for newness are inherent in the modernist project—Ezra Pound's oft-cited maxim, "make it new," comes to mind. To claim that a reading or a method is new or innovative requires a determination that said reading or method is contrasted with something labeled as "old" or "traditional." In the case of avant-garde art, what was innovative in visual culture was rhetorically contrasted to the conventional museum, which was considered to be a largely "antiquarian" project with its dusty and cluttered collections of antiquities that were, for the most part, unintelligible and inaccessible to the general public. The museum, as a repository for artifacts of human culture's past and a stodgy representation of canonical art history, was deemed an institution that was, lest it get with the modern program, irrelevant to modern life. European collections of antiquities, as comprehensive as they may have been, were thought to amount to little more than curiosities, at best, and spoils of war and colonialism, at worst.

Curation—as a means of selecting, narrating, and meaning-making with objects—emerged as a way to mediate narratives about innovation in visual culture, where the curator gives the objects a story and—importantly—raises their cultural profile and economic value. Modern art became sellable and consumable at least in part on account of curators and curationism. And the avant-garde was somewhat successful in pushing museums to modernize in terms of interactions with audiences: what museum-goers now see in lavishly arranged thematic exhibits—replete with objects displayed in a particular order, behind Plexiglas, narrated in multi-sensory experiences of text/sound/light, and linked to special merchandise in a museum shop—is indebted to the curationist processes common to the avant-garde. The so-called canon opens to the contemporary public, rather than to antiquarian or specialist, eyes. Art that seemed distant and irrelevant is now relatable and new. Newness and innovation, though, do not arise *ex nihilo*. What Pound's maxim, "make it new," arguably references is a dynamic process of interaction with the old—for Pound himself, this meant returning to the "classics" of world literature, especially that of ancient China. That is, the task is to engage the canon on different terms, making "it" (the "old") relevant for a different time and place. Making it new, then, can entail a curatorial form of selection and arrangement; its success depends somewhat on stabilizing a past and a canon with which to engage and against which one might declare innovation.

Some readers of this essay may detect a familiar dynamic in the above description of the positioning of newness and innovation in the visual arts. Traditional biblical scholarship—often now just called “historical criticism” or “traditional historical criticism”—has often been accused of antiquarianism and irrelevance by purveyors of new methodologies in the field. While such a characterization might be rhetorically expedient, not to mention an effective branding strategy in an economic climate that encourages individualism and the articulation of authentic identity claims, I would argue that it is fair to ask if such a characterization is always accurate or productive. That is, it is fair to ask: does such rhetoric actually move the field forward, methodologically speaking? If so, on what terms, and for whom? What, in the end, do we want out of innovation? Scholars who promote new or innovative methodologies (which at times are simply cast as new interpretations of old texts) tend to, like curators of avant-garde art, invest in discourses that maintain a binary relationship between tradition and innovation. Once such a dichotomy has been established, and historical criticism stabilized as a category that is a stand-in for stodginess and oldness, this signifier can be filled with all kinds of associations: elitist, conservative, universalizing, positivist, culturally insensitive, misogynist, heteronormative, and so on. What is usually missing or hidden in the discourse of newness and innovation is the extent to which (1) a set of classification strategies, even if different, are equally operative therein; and (2) newness is indebted to what has come before, or the very oldness from which the reader/curator seeks distance.

While it is not my aim in this essay to rehearse, or curate, a comprehensive history of historical criticism, it is important for my purposes to raise some contextual matters. I should also be clear that I am not invested in making the case that either traditional or innovative forms of biblical interpretation, if they are indeed all that different from one another, represent a singularly best course of action in terms of contemporary methodological questions and issues. I am willing to admit, and even embrace, the reality that I have been intellectually shaped by historical-critical discourses as well as other forms of humanistic engagement. Further, I am suspicious of contemporary scholarly arguments that are predicated on wholesale dismissals of historical-critical discourses or the people who conducted historical-critical studies “back in the day” just because they happened to inhabit, for the most part, European white male bodies. Such outright dismissal downplays what could be designated as a robust and varied intellectual history of the field and excuses us from engaging that past more fully. I would also argue that ignoring our disciplinary histories puts us at a disadvantage in terms of articulating the specific contributions our field has made and potentially continues to make to the humanities.

and to knowledge production more widely. Those who have had to make the case to keep a faculty line in biblical studies should know that it is not all that easy to convince non-bible colleagues about what exactly the field brings to the departmental table in the twenty-first century.

Simply put, what is commonly referred to as historical criticism is not a monolith, it did not arise in a vacuum, and it has endured a complicated legacy that simple caricatures as “antiquarian” or “traditional” obscures (Lopez and Penner 2014). It is important to highlight the reality that there is no one single, linear trajectory by which historical criticism developed, even if we most often associate historical criticism with some modes of post-Enlightenment German intellectual tradition. It is the case that earlier proponents of critical biblical scholarship expended significant energy rethinking, even railing against, the theological paradigms that bound biblical texts and traditions to institutional church authority. Earlier historical critics were also critics of blind faith, critics of religion, and critics of authority. Invoking emergent modern science and historical methods—as problematic as that might seem to some interpreters now—had much more of an impact on the development of the study of biblical literature and the study of religion, not to mention the humanities as a whole, than we often suppose. I think it is worth remembering, on occasion, how radical the very idea was, when it was first suggested by Martin Kähler and others, that there could be, for example, a “historical Jesus” (i.e., a contingent human person, located in space and time, shaped by his local culture) who is different than the “Christ of faith” (i.e., a universal cosmic being who exists outside of space and time). Some earlier historical critics went even further, claiming that there was no historical evidence for Jesus at all—but there was plenty of evidence to suggest that the Jesus of the Gospels was part of a mythological tradition indebted to its Roman religious landscape.⁸ It is easy to see how trenchant conflicts over power and authority between the historical contingency of biblical literature and the universalizing claims of the church often could come to the surface in these earlier historical-critical conversations. These were important moments in the thinking of German theologians and scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as attempts were made to negotiate relationships between the constrictions of the church and the freedom of historical inquiry, the latter being a fundamental component of Enlightenment values.

8 For a summary and appraisal of the various aspects of the “Christ Myth” debate, which involved the denial of the existence of the historical Jesus via historical-critical method, see Drews 1926.

While many contemporary interpreters might immediately think of the German tradition when the term “historical criticism” is invoked, and for many scholars their initiation into the guild of biblical studies still involves spending quality time with German scholarship, Anglophone histories of scholarship are just as illuminating although remembered less commonly. This does not mean such traditions are irrelevant, however. One key element that provides a clue as to what earlier British and American historical-critical biblical scholars were up against with regard to freedom of inquiry is the prevalence of publicized heresy trials and removals from academic and ecclesial posts for participating in historical-critical biblical scholarship. On the British scene, the stories of F. D. Maurice and William Robertson Smith stand out as comparable examples (Rogerson 1995). In the U.S. context, biblical scholarship has had quite a different legacy due to the complexity of the social fabric and religious landscape. American biblical scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not only steeped in the study of the ancient world; they were deeply involved in contestations over social justice and ethics, debates about religion and Darwinian evolution, and conversations about higher education. Discussions of these issues are not difficult to locate in earlier studies. And perhaps no American historical critic was as famous or as controversial as Charles Augustus Briggs (1841–1913).

Like many of his contemporaries, Briggs had studied in Germany—partially because that was where one had to study then, and partially because he was disenchanted with the anti-intellectualism in the New Jersey-based congregation he served as a minister—and reconfigured the historical-critical enterprise for American audiences. He sought to create a sharp divide between the freedom of biblical critics and the power of the church to determine meaning in interpretation. He admonished readers not to act as “infants” regarding biblical texts, wherein they allowed ministers, teachers, and other authorities to serve as “parents.” Briggs’s unrelenting call for Bible-readers to “grow up” and think independently resulted in a heresy trial and a series of conversations at Union Theological Seminary, his institutional affiliation, regarding academic freedom and whether a faculty member should be supported when publicly vilified, despite threats from the church and other parties. The principles for which Briggs stood his ground—most importantly that all claims of dogma related to the Bible must be tested—eventually became standard practice and led, in major ways, to delineations of “historical criticism” as a separate form of investigation that stood over against ecclesial interpretation and authority. Historical critics like Briggs were negotiating the rise of science as a paradigm of knowing, meaning-making, and truth-telling. Far from blithely focusing on the ancient world while remaining willfully clueless about their own world, many earlier biblical scholars entered the fray of public discourse and “culture

wars” as a matter of course, for there was much at stake. And far from claiming “objectivity” or “neutrality,” these earlier scholars championed polemical rhetorics and causes more frequently, and more germanely, than the contemporary charge of outdatedness suggests. Briggs, for example, made a “plea” for higher study, which in his view was aligned with modern science: “[r]eligion and theology have taken part in this struggle, but they have not warred against science, but rather on the side of science against a common foe—ecclesiastical domination, the greatest foe of theology, as it is also of all learning” (Briggs 1904: 435). According to Briggs, biblical scholars who engage in critical study already participate in the modernization of the world; they must be proponents of higher education if the world they seek is to come into being, and ministers in particular must be highly educated if they are to further the education of Americans as citizens in a participatory democracy.

Earlier biblical critics, bound by their own historical contexts and the pressing issues of their time, argued for the legitimacy of reading the Bible differently over what had been earlier reified, and were using what were then modern methods to do so. It does not appear that we need to make that argument today, as “reading differently than what has been reified” is the assumed dominant position. The continued practice of historical criticism—what some (often critics) now call “traditional” biblical scholarship—still bears the imprint of the scholarship of that early period, although obviously the social and cultural landscape has shifted in many quarters so that the stakes, and therefore the claims made in relationship to those stakes, have necessarily changed as a result. And, to be sure, some historical-critical trajectories have ended up being subsumed back into the structures of church authority and dogma. Still, we should not lose sight of the fact that some scholars still receive heresy trials and lose their academic posts for conducting the same lines of inquiry as earlier scholars like Briggs!

In order to understand the ongoing importance and influence of this historical-critical work, examining the curational alignments in this methodology is useful.⁹ Chief among these curational alignments and emphases is, at least in New Testament scholarship, a quest for origins and linear development of texts and traditions, or the effort made to locate “holy beginnings” as a fixed moment in time and space with static actors and ideas. Another curational interest is that of rendering “our” materials and their attendant ideas stable and definable, or drawing boundaries around the literature and traditions under consideration so as to delimit and isolate the historical phenomenon. Related to boundary definition is the establishment of consistency and coherence in the subject, whether literature, a theological tradition, community groups, or

9 For an extensive elaboration of the following, see Penner and Lopez, 2015: 25–70.

types of readers; that is, coherence and consistency stabilize the internal phenomenon so as to sharpen the contrast already created by the boundary delimitation. Finally, an important piece of curatorial alignment and ordering is to be found in the notions of distinctiveness and divergence, or the delineation of a text, tradition, or community as substantively different from, while having an affinity with, its surroundings, neighbors, or backgrounds. In the case of New Testament scholarship, the ordering of things—or ways to sort and curate materials, traditions, and readerships—has included the following: (1) the search for Christian origins and the development of Christianity as a religion, (2) a commitment to the stability and durability of the idea that Christianity is an entity with a stable and durable following or audience, and (3) the affirmation that this stable Christian entity displays significant enough consistency and coherence to render it distinguishable from Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds as well as other facets of its environment. In other words, when we attend to the operative ordering principles, we can better see how the past is brought into being by the concerns of the present. Whether or not we agree with the results of scholarship, we can detect ways of ordering in the field that point toward curationist tendencies. This observation matters because curation, again, underscores the idea that nothing in disciplinary knowledge is done “objectively” or without a human touch.

Curating the Playing Field

Given the above assessment, simply dismissing earlier scholarship as “outdated” or “traditional” obscures methodological conversations that are important to entertain and to nurture. With a view toward curation, I see potential in theorizing about and with the discourses of historical criticism in order to highlight the methodological challenges these discourses still pose to the field and as a way to potentially level the proverbial playing field as far as biblical interpretation is concerned. As for what I mean when I use the term “level” in relationship to the biblical interpretation playing field: I am asking what it might look like to see rhetorics of tradition and innovation in biblical scholarship in non-oppositional terms. To take a page from a religious-studies method and theory playbook, I want to urge considering and describing approaches and readings in terms of a methodological principle that emphasizes “difference without hierarchy.”¹⁰ In my view, whether biblical scholars can deliberate

10 For an elaboration of what it means to define and study religion through discourses of comparison in a post-9/11 political and cultural climate, see Lincoln 2012: 1–18.

matters of difference and disagreement without elevating what we like and denigrating what we do not like is a matter of methodological interest. What I offer here are some points for further reflection and conversation.

First, as with new or innovative reading strategies, historical criticism advocates for an informed reconciliation with modern epistemological frameworks rather than uncritical acceptance of an ideological status quo. While proponents of “innovative” reading strategies may emphasize this pattern as something that has arisen only in the last half-century, this is far from the case and may in fact be a hallmark of the field as a whole. Second, although it might seem obvious, we are indebted to historical criticism for relentlessly promoting the basic idea that things change over time. Those “things” include human institutions like religion and theology, and even biblical texts and canons themselves. Emphasizing the historical distance between the ancient and modern worlds, as well as questioning whether there is in fact a directly linear-developmental relationship between what we now call early Christianity in Asia Minor, for example, and modern Protestant traditions in the United States, is a powerful and underestimated challenge to continued religio-ideological formation and assumptions that “our” ancients are our ancestors. Third, and related, historical criticism challenges the idea of a universal humanity and collective cosmic religion by maintaining that the ancients were fully embedded in and influenced by the world in which they found themselves. While some of the experiments scholars did with “backgrounds” are not necessarily in vogue now, the idea that a religion or other social institution is imbricated in its local cultural milieu is paramount to consider. This challenge opened the door to an understanding that biblical texts may not be windows onto ancient reality, but might rather be contributing to myth-making processes common to the time. It also allows for discussion of cultural difference as a methodological focus; as the ancients are embedded in their culture, *so we are in ours*. Fourth, as artifacts from the ancient world, biblical texts are human productions indicative of human culture. That is, there is distance between the authors and audiences of biblical literature in the historical context in which it was produced and contexts in which it is deployed and interpreted as “scripture.” Even as some interpreters might suppose that biblical literature as we know it is in some sense a modern fabrication, not to mention an unstable one, the location of biblical literature as historically contingent signals that its application to, say, modern ethical or social programs or policies is exceptional rather than normative. Historical contingency also means that we might interrogate the givenness of claims within these texts, including claims to authenticity and veracity. Fifth, historical criticism challenges the stance that biblical texts are the sole domain of clerical representatives of institutional religious hierarchies,

systematic theologians, or other mediating figures of dogma who prop up their normativity as an apparatus of power. In so doing, space is opened to ask difficult questions and test all claims and presuppositions in and about these materials.

Now, not all earlier historical critics organized materials in the same way. The same is the case on the contemporary scene; even the most “traditional” scholars genuinely look(ed) for new ways to curate data, albeit within particular confines and for specific audiences. That said, attention to elements of the rhetoric of historical criticism is another way to understand the arrangement of material and ideas therein. Given the points I raised above, several effects of this rhetoric stand out as challenges to the notion that historical criticism is always and forever to be understood as “outdated” and non-innovative. Obviously, even if the trope of the biblical scholar standing against the church is now somewhat muted in light of changes in ecclesial politics and scholarly alignments, the notion that historical-critical discourses are disruptive of authority and tradition persists. What contemporary interpreters might want to cast as stodgy and traditional and representative of grand narratives was, at some point, a series of potentially radical counter-narratives. One rhetorical effect of historical-critical discourses is to amplify the role of criticism and the critic in biblical interpretation, especially in the face of dogmatism. “Criticism,” clarified Briggs, “is a method of knowledge. Wherever there is any sphere of knowledge, Criticism has its place. Criticism is the test of the certainty of knowledge and the method of its verification. It is vain to suppose that Dogma can avoid Criticism any more than any other object of knowledge” (Briggs 1906: 861). That no ideological configuration—dogma—is inoculated from critical appraisal prompts a question we should ask: where have we let dogma—of any kind—define our work? Under what circumstances? What difference has it made? For whom?

Another such rhetorical effect of historical criticism is, as scholars of the Dutch radical tradition articulated it (e.g., van Eysinga 1912), to unshackle biblical literature from the prison of exclusivity. Historical-critical discourse may not have invented or introduced the idea that individuals besides mediators like ministers and theologians could engage biblical literature and do something with the texts that resembles meaning-making. But by insisting that the Bible was not to be subjected to a monopoly of meaning and was not the property of any one group, authoritative or not, historical critics (1) unleashed biblical literature from narrow interpretive frames, and (2) opened the door for contemporary interpreters to begin to ask how “ordinary people” might read and do things with biblical literature regardless of what the “experts” say. This is precisely where I would say there has been a profound misunderstanding

of earlier historical-critical work on the part of some contemporary interpreters: asking the question of what a biblical text may have meant in the ancient world in which it found its first hearers and/or readers does not necessarily “privilege” or “fetishize” the ancients over and against modern interpreters. Rather, such a maneuver highlights the notion that there is a difference and distance—a rupture, even—between how ancient and modern people saw things, a difference that we may not be able to easily explain or otherwise reconcile through linear-developmental models and theological platitudes. Fronting such a rupture undermines assumptions that there is one correct and authoritative meaning or way to engage biblical literature, that this one true way transcends time and space, and that “the way it is” now represents an inevitable culmination over a span of time. Again, the “critical” component of historical-critical discourse can expose the humanity and contingent nature of all forms of knowledge and meaning-making.

Aside from the critical impulse of historical criticism, it is worth emphasizing the “historical” part as a methodological tool. The charge of “antiquarianism” from those who desire to assert innovation by creating distance from historical-critical discourses is usually understood as *a focus on or obsession with the ancient world*. However, this is not quite what the term “antiquarian” has denoted in historiographical conversations. As Arnaldo Momigliano theorizes in a now-seminal essay on antiquarianism and ancient historical traditions (Momigliano 1950), antiquarianism concerns the collection and use of ancient objects—or objects from a past—to understand institutions and customs, often by non-specialists. Modern antiquarians’ collections often become the basis for museum holdings. Historians are trained specialists who focus rather on chronology of ideas. The distance between modern antiquarians and historians in the intellectual history of the humanities, Momigliano argues, is not as vast as is supposed or assumed; in fact, the two become interdependent. The commonality between them is that both focus on narrating particular arrangements of materials—for the antiquarian, synchronically, and for the historian, diachronically—to compose narratives about the present using the past. That is, both the antiquarian and the historian *curate* their materials for audiences. This propensity for arrangement, Momigliano suggests, arguably stretches back into antiquity: ancient writers such as Varro or Livy or Pliny the Elder were not simply making catalogs of information about the distant past (e.g., Roman origins) but doing so as a way to narrate relationships between their present and those pasts. Ultimately, the issue is about how objects are identified, classified, and ordered so that history can be written. Whether for pleasure or for statecraft, the materials are curated toward particular ends.

When the writing of history is taken seriously as a human process, several issues come to the fore that can prove to be useful in our discussion of historical criticism, suggesting it has not outlasted its usefulness or relevance. Beyond simple reporting of “what happened” or delineating “great men and their deeds,” historiography raises the prospect that history-writing, as a curatorial task, is contentious and political. While some might have supposed that the linguistic turn in the humanities signifies an end of history-writing that excuses us from concern about the past, the contrary is actually the case. Hayden White’s often-cited challenge in his *Metahistory* (1973) underscores the point: history-writing is not just about reporting, but about narrating. Structurally, attention to historiography helps us locate important binaries in history-writing such as continuity/discontinuity, facts/fiction, reporting/narrative, stability/instability, and answers/questions. And curation, again, brings focus to the present, urging that we arrange our ancient materials in order to narrate a past that is useful, and useable, in the present.

Let me give an example of the complicated role curation plays in writing a useable past. The category, “*women*,” has been a site for historical work that Joan Scott has characterized as a “fantasy echo” (Scott 2011: 48), a concept that offers caution for arranging materials toward a useful past for women in the present. That is, writing this kind of history requires consolidating and assuming an essentialist character to group identity in the past in the service of creating and managing a relationship between the past and the present. This relationship, as the basis for writing history that is useful in contemporary social debates, is borne of “empathetic identification made possible either by the existence of universal human characteristics or, in some instances, by a transcendent set of traits and experiences belonging to women or workers or members of religious or ethnic communities” (Scott 2011: 48). Such commonality and resonance among individuals and groups across time, perhaps especially groups of people who have been on history’s so-called underside, may not actually be as consistent as is often assumed. Rather, for Scott it is the fantasy—the imagination—that allows one to write one’s self and one’s chosen group (back) into history. Fantasy functions to control for incoherence by arranging moments diachronically, wherein “narrative is a way of resolving antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession” (Scott 2011: 50). As with *women*, I would suggest that it is through a fantasy echo that we connect with the *early Christians* as we imagine them to exist in or behind the pages of the New Testament. It is *our* retrospective identification with *our* ancients that is doing the work of downplaying diversity and reifying categories and power relations.

Herein is the conundrum: critical historiography of the type that historical-critical discourses have promoted have in some sense worked against consistency, continuity, and resonance. But in the writing of a useful and useable past, empathetic identification passes over such complexity in favor of stabilizing the categories. The question at this juncture is not whether “traditional” or “innovative” modes of biblical interpretation should be placed in hierarchical or oppositional relationship to each other. It should be clear that I am not confident these characterizations are durable under pressure. Perhaps there is something of a critique of historical-critical discourses herein, however. It could be that the issue with historical criticism lies not in the curational/ordering practices themselves, but that the ordering practices have somehow ceased to function dynamically and/or dialectically. In formalizing historical criticism as a *method*, where “method” is thought to denote *the set of ordered steps that is formulaically applied to a text*, perhaps the critical impulses and acts of the imagination ossify and do not take on the vibrancy and complexity that they otherwise would. It bears asking, to be sure, what it would take to do more imaginative historical-critical work. What would it take to improvise with the curational models rather than insisting on using (or denouncing) the same old categories and procedures? How can we realign materials and objects, expand boundaries, accept incoherence and inconsistency, and otherwise reconfigure our curations through drawing in different elements?

These questions point to an overarching methodological issue, which is how we can use curation to continue to level the playing field, which, again, reflects my concern with how we characterize different trajectories while avoiding the construction and reification of dichotomies and hierarchies. As far as curation is concerned, variant curations expose diverse things, and every curation will highlight something different about the material. So the question is less about the material under consideration, and less about labels, than it is about the modern concept and practice of curation itself—that is, what relations it seeks to establish and to validate, and what viewers are in view. In fact, I would say that the rhetoric of curation says more about *relationality* than about objects. Curators make decisions, ultimately, about relationships. Every object or concept takes on a slightly variant range of signification depending on how and on what terms a curator decides to re-relate it to other materials or concepts. That means that knowledge of one single thing—Greco-Roman backgrounds, archaeological materials, reception history—is in some sense infinite in relational affiliations. It is the belief that only one kind of relation is valid or correct that limits meaning-making. Any curator or scholar can quite easily make the mistake of promoting singularity and closing down meaning,

not just historical critics. One might even say that it is vital to understand that methodological mistakes such as this are not inherent to historical criticism or avoidable in so-called innovative methods. Nor is the multiplicity of possible relationships and meanings a discovery of the last half-century of biblical scholarship. Embedded in that very sentiment is the assumption that the intellectual history of the field should be characterized in a linear-developmental manner (just like Christian origins!) where the original oneness of historical criticism (to some, orthodoxy) gave way to the multiplicity of modern methods (to some, heresies). Earlier scholars already knew that singularity closed down meaning-making options. Curation, then, is ultimately an epistemological project that creates manifold meanings through ordering and validating relations between objects. A healthy, perhaps even curative, curational model will understand that whatever is established in one moment will of necessity be reconfigured in another realignment of the relations between objects. I submit that passing judgment and rendering hierarchies between “tradition” and “innovation” in biblical interpretation forecloses these multiple alignments.

Curation as Curative?

As I descended the steps toward “A World of Emotions,” a 2017 exhibit in the subterranean Onassis Cultural Center gallery in midtown Manhattan, I immediately noticed the power of multi-sensory experience and narration. Once I entered, the lights were dim, I heard the music as serene, and there was copious text to explain the items to non-specialist viewers. On display in the gallery space was a sizable collection of objects spanning nearly a millennium of ancient Greek history. Vases and ostraca, stage masks and funeral inscriptions, mythological reliefs and jewelry, statuary and oil lamps were all displayed together. The theme of “ancient emotions” brought these objects into relationship with one another. The main idea behind the narrative structuring the exhibit was that the ancients had robust and complex emotional lives that were often represented visually through facial expressions, gestures, clothing, and other attributes. The ancients were just like us, emotionally speaking, and yet not like us at all. In viewing this exhibit, audiences were asked to think with disparate objects about a very human story, a story about joy, sorrow, anger, lust, fear, and boredom. We are asked to relate to the ancients, to empathize, to be a part of the emotional ride as it were. Even as the choice of objects could be described as underwhelming, critics hailed the exhibit as “moving” and “innovative”; the *New York Times*’ art critic—contrasting the narrative-rich emotions exhibit with the narratively sparse, and relatively vacant, display

halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—stated that “[t]his is precisely what an object-rich museum like the Met could be doing with its undervisited permanent collections, but rarely does” (Cotter 2017). “A World of Emotions” is a product of constructed relationships and relationality on several levels. This exhibit’s emphasis on narrative—on making a coherent and relatable story about ancient emotions where there may not naturally be one—is an illustration of the power of curation.¹¹

In light of the curational reflections above, we might observe that my initial discussion of Trajan’s Column—another emotionally galvanizing ancient object, perhaps—highlighted one curational angle: the images around the side of the column and the range of questions those elicit among modern viewers and professionals. But what if another curational angle, no less historical, were fronted: that of the position of the column *qua* column or structure within a larger arrangement of other structures, structures such as the Roman Forum (ancient and modern versions) or any number of museum spaces. Now, the questions change: maybe the individual images and whether we can “read” them do not matter as much, at least not as much as the object as a whole. Of course, we must keep in mind that the curation of these objects and structures *in relation to one another* differ from the ancient world to our own, as they have been arranged and rearranged in line with a different set of curative principles. So we can detect an endless chain of re-curational associations, highlighting different aspects of the Column.

So, too, biblical interpretation can be viewed similarly to Trajan’s Column. As a field, biblical scholarship can be assessed in one way that can often be seen as the only way—the most evident way—but then a different curational lens is applied, and all of a sudden the material takes on a new life for new audiences in new contexts. Such differences in curation and its production and validation can be executed and performed within something like historical criticism just on its own—or it can be done through the diversity of curational practices evidenced betwixt and between “traditional” and “innovative” approaches. But then we might also think of what might happen if “traditional” and “innovative” curational models begin to interact and converse. How might that change the landscape? The “World of Emotions” exhibit points in this direction, where ancient materials are brought together around the principle of emotion,

11 In fact, the curators and scholarly consultants for the exhibit, most of whom work in the fields of ancient history and classics, readily admit in the catalog essays that it is anachronistic to assign modern emotional categories to the ancients and that the arrangement of materials in the exhibit resonates with how emotions “penetrate every aspect of *our* lives” (emphasis mine). See Chanoitis, et al. (eds.) 2017.

which might be captivating. However, perhaps the theme of emotionality and emotional response is so captivating to contemporary viewers because it is a very modern interest and concern that highlights a particular turn in neoliberal capitalism at the moment (e.g., as evidenced in the ad slogans: “Love is a Subaru” by the automaker or “Open Happiness” by Coca-Cola). That aside, this dynamic is also noteworthy in that we can see here how materials can take on new life through a modern concept and narrative. Materials that might have nothing in common in their ancient setting—other than simply existing in that ancient setting—are now gathered together and narrated in a way to bring out a relation among these objects that would not be apparent in other more “traditional” modes of curation. In a way this is like a segment on the children’s program *Sesame Street*: you have an apple, a banana, an orange, and a horse, and the audience is invited to sing along with the program: “*one of these things is not like the other, one of these things just doesn’t belong.*” Traditionally, we might say the horse is not like the fruit, and according to *Sesame Street*, we would be applauded for that choice and considered proficient classifiers. But what if we narrate the relationship in terms of one’s likes and dislikes: then we might have an apple, an orange, and a horse all related while the banana is excluded. Or what if we narrate it in terms of stuff one finds on a farm or edible objects: what we would say “doesn’t belong” then would depend on any number of variables. The point is this: the latter relationships are equally as possible, if not valid, as the former. And herein lies the heart of the power of curation: *it always reveals and conceals in the same moment.* So power is palpably manifest in curation. Still, a thoughtfully curative curation will be attentive to these power dynamics, and hopefully also seek to curate the power embedded in curational processes.

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Contemporary (Analog) Tensions and Digital Futures¹

Jay Twomey

I began to feel more at home in biblical studies than in my own field of English starting around 2005. The Modern Language Association was already less appealing to me than the American Comparative Literature Association, and neither was as engaging as the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, which I'd begun attending only a couple of years prior. So imagine my excitement when *Biblical Interpretation* published my first serious effort at reception study that year (Twomey 2005). That article turned out to be a productive entrée into my new field, introducing me to scholars whose work I admired and laying the groundwork for my next few projects. I remain deeply grateful to *Biblical Interpretation* for its support—in that early moment, and then later when Hugh Pyper encouraged me to submit a second article, and again now that I have the chance, at Tat-siong Benny Liew's kind invitation, to participate in this celebration of the journal's 25th anniversary. To my mind, *Biblical Interpretation* is biblical studies. There are plenty of approaches to biblical texts, yes, but the “contemporary approaches” embraced by this journal over the years have always struck me as essential. Here's another way I'm grateful to *Biblical Interpretation*: I've been in administration for the last five years, meaning I've been hard-pressed to find the time to stay sufficiently informed of trends and new work in the field. But when the opportunity came, I decided to immerse myself in the archive, both in preparation for my contribution to this publication and as a way of returning (since my administrative term is now nearly over) to research, and with gusto. Staying up late not to write memos or advance university initiatives but simply to read, one after another, the articles *Biblical Interpretation* has published on Paul, in order to reflect on the now and the future of the field, has been a luxury!

In what follows I propose to take up the theme of this publication project—what's contemporary and what's possibly on the horizon—but with regard to *Biblical Interpretation* itself rather than the field more generally. I certainly

1 Thanks to my colleague James Lee and the Digital Scholarship Center he co-directs at the University of Cincinnati for invaluable assistance with the second, “digital,” portion of this essay. Thanks also to Suzanne Mekking and Leonieke Aalders of Brill, as well as to Tat-siong Benny Liew, for so generously making the *Biblical Interpretation* archive available to us.

am interested in the “contemporary” in a wider sense. But as someone whose engagement with biblical scholarship underwrites a focus precisely on the contemporary—that is, on Paul in recent reception contexts—I find, in looking over the journal’s archive, that I’m ever more curious about the tensions that arise from the juxtaposition of contemporary approaches and “the classical disciplines of exegesis.”² While there’s no question that this foundational tension has produced much very good work in *Biblical Interpretation*, it is surprising to me how fraught the problem of history remains. That I’m surprised may well be a function of my location on the margins of biblical studies. Nevertheless, from that location it would seem to me that the three features of reception study endorsed by Timothy Beal should, and in many cases do, apply to much work in biblical studies proper. Beal insists that: (1) biblical texts are not simply given independently of discursive practices, but are “constantly changing as they are made and remade in different cultural productions of meaning”; (2) the Bible is not simply books to read, but exists in and is widely experienced across various media; and (3) “scriptural culture” is “material ... [and] sensual” in addition to being “symbolic ... [and] semantic. It is about things as much as ideas, form as much as content, medium as much as message, and performance as much as interpretation” (Beal 2011: 370–71).³ What’s more, as Nancy Klancher argues, there’s a continuum linking the earliest moments in biblical interpretation history to contemporary reception studies, and the best current reception work “exposes biblical exegesis, interpretation, and reception [alike] as socially, politically, and ideologically ambitious, locally situated, interested, and rhetorically coercive” (Klancher 2013: 129). I suppose it’s precisely because most essays in *Biblical Interpretation* seem already to imply this argument—if understood programmatically and, more often than not, without any special investment in reception study—that the tension between theory and traditional critical approaches to the study of the Bible is so interesting.

In the first section of this paper, I’ll be thinking of Beal and Klancher as I survey the work *Biblical Interpretation* has published on Paul since its founding. Focusing on one biblical figure and set of texts may help provide some

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- 2 The unsigned “Editorial Statement” published in the inaugural issue of *Biblical Interpretation* asserted that “the journal will encourage a dialogue between the various new approaches and the classical disciplines of exegesis” (Exum 1993: i). See also the “Editor’s Preface” a decade later for a restatement of the principle (Exum 2003). I am associating both pieces with Cheryl Exum because of her role as the journal’s executive editor from 1992–2007.
 - 3 Exum has long seemed to support a view of the field as a form of cultural studies in this vein. She has also been an essential force in linking biblical and reception studies together as mutually supportive scholarly enterprises.

cohesion, but an overview of this sort is still bound to be partial (in the sense of both interested and limited). In the second section I will broaden my focus quite a bit, using digital tools to take nearly everything published by the journal over the last 25 years, some 4.8 million words, into account. Thanks entirely to the accidents of writing, I'll mirror in the process the very tension I'm trying to understand, as the (brief) close readings of section one give way to the contemporary techniques of section two.

Paul in *Biblical Interpretation*

On first glance, it is slightly surprising to see how sporadically Paul stumbles, in his peripatetic afterlife, across the pages of the journal. Not counting book reviews and the occasional citation in articles on other topics, a Pauline text receives its first sustained treatment in volume 2.2 in an article on Titus 1.12–13. There's one Paul-related article each in 2.3 and 3.1, nothing in 3.2, and then—bam—four (or four and a half, really) all at once in 3.3, nothing in volume 4, one each in volumes 5 and 6, but nothing again in 7 (except, it's true, for a discussion of Paul and the slave girl of Acts 16 in an article on Luke-Acts). And so it continues, with a special issue in 2005 (13.3), devoted to reflections on Jewish-Christian relations and containing a whopping eight articles, being the only significant outlier. When compared to, say, the frequency with which articles on Paul appear from 1993 to present in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (46 times), the relatively smaller number of Paul-related articles in *Biblical Interpretation* (28) is notable.

And yet, that first glance is deceiving. For one thing, the *Journal of Biblical Literature* publishes more articles per issue than *Biblical Interpretation*. But more importantly, when compared to other biblical subjects within *Biblical Interpretation*, Paul's doing just fine. Moses comes in at three articles, Jesus gets 57, Song of Songs and Isaiah have about a dozen each, and Revelation achieves the biblically unsatisfying number of nine. Inconsistencies in metadata and library search engine features across different subscription services obviously limit the accuracy of any comparative quantitative assessment like this. Changing the terms of a search, from subject to scripture reference, for example, produces variations in results. And how many of the 33 articles on Exodus through Deuteronomy, or the 161 articles in which his name appears, are substantially about Moses? Nevertheless, you get the picture. Jennifer Koosed and Stephen Moore, in the introduction to their special issue on affect theory in *Biblical Interpretation*, note that new theoretical perspectives face “a challenge of creative adaptation” when brought into conversation with

the “close reading/exegesis” so fundamental to the field (Koosed and Moore 2014: 386).⁴ Paul’s appearances in *Biblical Interpretation* may be sporadic, but they’re not insignificant in number overall, suggesting that he is a rather good, if surprising,⁵ way to think about the conjunction of the “classical” and the “contemporary.”

Reading through *Biblical Interpretation*’s Pauline archive, I was struck by how few articles land entirely at either of these poles. The ones that reach furthest in the direction of a contemporary approach can be quite remarkable, perhaps none more so than Stephen Curkpatrick’s “Apostrophic Desire and Parousia in the Apostle Paul’s Epistles: A Derridean Proposal for Textual Interpretation” (Curkpatrick 2002). While Derrida’s name appears in the inaugural issue of *Biblical Interpretation*, and the journal thereafter consistently published work inspired by poststructuralism, Curkpatrick’s essay is the first to bring Paul and “high theory” into sustained conversation. Well, conversation may be too social a term for what is more akin to possession, as whole pages of text about and citations from the epistles are pressed through a Derridean filter.⁶ Curkpatrick, who writes to counter, perhaps also to exacerbate, the exegetical “fear that these epistles might lose their divine authority if read for *merely* literary interest,” taps into a long-standing dialogue in *Biblical Interpretation* about just how biblical meaning ought to be or can be made; he continues, however, that any approach that establishes “protocols for certain interpretive containment or concession is a misunderstanding of textuality” (Curkpatrick 2002: 176–77, emphasis original).⁷

4 For a sense of just how challenging such adaptation is, compare Anke Inselmann’s exceedingly oblique response to Koosed and Moore a couple of years later: in studying emotion and affect in the Bible, she writes, one ought to cultivate appropriate historical-critical methods, such as “psychological exegesis” (2016: 548), to minimize the “danger of anachronism” (Inselmann 2016: 548, 536).

5 Thinking of the work of Badiou and others, Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood write that “‘Saint Paul’ ... becomes ... an exceedingly unlikely but extremely productive site where contemporary theoretical questions ... are hashed out” (Moore and Sherwood 2010b: 224). This seems “exceedingly unlikely” precisely because, as Moore and Sherwood note in a prior piece, Pauline scholarship has often been even less interested in raising critical questions than other, similarly conservative and theologically-inflected New Testament fields (Moore and Sherwood 2010a: 105).

6 One thinks of Jennings 2006 as a close parallel.

7 Mark Given lodges a similar complaint in his discussion of Paul’s Areopagus speech in Acts: “historical and theological arguments both for and against the essential authenticity of the speech are based on inadequate reading strategies” (Given 1995: 357).

An early Paul-related article in *Biblical Interpretation* that wades into recognizably similar critical terrain is Stephen Fowl's "Texts Don't Have Ideologies" (Fowl 1995). Despite what his title might suggest and, indeed, what he claims as the impetus for his piece—namely, the mistakes of "feminists, Marxists, liberation theologians and other interested parties" (Fowl 1995: 15)—Fowl effectively recasts exegesis as a thoroughly contextualizable endeavor without clear recourse to historical accuracy (at least as a method for uncovering "essential origins"). This leads him to place some absurd restrictions on claims one wants to make about the Bible ("No, no, you can't call Genesis patriarchal!"). But, such cavils aside, Fowl's study of Abraham as an unstable cultural signifier when read through Philo, Paul, and, finally, Justin Martyr, leads to a perspective not unlike Curkpatrick's. Instead of seeking to shore up a biblical text's or figure's ideological stability, "we should endeavor to show how specific social, political, material and theological influences and conflicts shaped and were shaped by the interpretation of particular biblical texts at particular points in time" (Fowl 1995: 33). Yet Curkpatrick takes this critical impulse further, creatively eschewing history in favor of textual undecidability, contrasting the certainties sought by proponents of standard forms of exegesis, the representatives of "Apostle Paul LMT INC," with the whimsical ethics of scholars employed by "Apostrophe Paul and Companions LMT INC" (Curkpatrick 2002: 192). Pauline studies in *Biblical Interpretation*, always interesting, doesn't get more entertaining than this. Or not much more. One outstanding exception is Alice Bach and Jennifer Glancy's highly creative "The Morning After in Corinth: Bread-and-butter Notes, Part I," which serves up reflections on ancient and modern foods, 1 Cor. 11:30, and power (Bach and Glancy 2003). Bach and Glancy don't so much eschew the historical as appropriate it differently in a new historicist mode, providing a literary-historical context (namely, classical representations of cannibalism) alien to Christian theological investment in the Lord's Supper. And in the process, they displace Paul's own authoritative voice in brief fictionalizations of the dawning critical awareness of members of the community, like Chloe (Bach and Glancy 2003: 458).

At the other end of the spectrum, that is, when Paul-related articles in *BI* veer away from the contemporary and toward something more traditionally exegetical, one *can* find a sort of sputtering outrage, as when John Elliott goes on about the lack of evidence in the New Testament to support claims by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others that there was (or might have been, or that in any case it's worthwhile trying, even against the grain, to discover a sense of) some form of egalitarianism in early Christianity prior to Paul (Elliott 2003). To be fair, even as Elliott dismantles efforts to insist upon a vision of equality in or for the church, he laments having been forced to do so, contrary to his own

principles, by the evidence of history; and he hints at a pressing contemporary aim, namely to avoid what he considers the “seductive” fantasy of a church built otherwise: for “if the church were ever to put an egalitarian vision into practice, it would be a first-time event and an accomplishment that eluded even Jesus and his first followers” (Elliott 2003: 206). In other words, Elliott presumably wants us to keep pressing for change rather than daydreaming about alternative realities in the past. Still, one can’t help but feel that “evidence” is deployed in his article almost solely as an ideological weapon (and Elliott lobs the word “evidence” like a grenade some 30 times) against precisely those critical, contemporary perspectives that might produce actual change in religious communities or biblical studies classrooms.

One of the most admirable qualities of *Biblical Interpretation* is that it welcomes all of these voices, even setting in close proximity the last two articles mentioned above: one of them taking aim at Schüssler Fiorenza (Fowl 2003), the other a kind of extrapolation of her work (Bach and Glancy 2003). It’s practically a sociological experiment. And most of the individual articles on Paul published by the journal evince exactly this spirit of experimentation. An early Paul article in *Biblical Interpretation*, for instance, Khiok-khng Yeo’s “The Rhetorical Hermeneutic of 1 Corinthians 8 and Chinese Ancestor Worship,” offers a “reconstruction of the rhetorical situation” in Paul’s Corinth (Yeo 1994: 295). Here one finds discussion of Gnostics, manuscript variations, and ancient rhetorical forms. Here one also finds references to Bakhtin, an emphasis on the contexts of interpretation, and a belief in the possibility of encountering our own ethical values in a first-century text.⁸ Yeo’s approval of Christian missionary work, even if the goal of his article is to encourage mutual understanding in mission contexts, is both less appealing to me and less characteristic of most of the Paul-related work in *Biblical Interpretation*. That’s not to say that there’s no other scholarship of this sort, though. Comparing women’s agency through spiritual gifts in the Pauline epistles with the opportunities such gifts afford women in otherwise quite gender-restrictive contemporary Appalachian Pentecostal communities, a study by Lee Johnson, titled “Women and Glossolalia in Pauline Communities: The Relationship between Pneumatic Gifts and Authority,” is an especially interesting example (Johnson 2013).

There are really only a few articles in the journal, at least among the Paul-related material, that privilege method and accuracy (à la John Elliott) over what Fowl characterizes, dismissively, as interest. At the same time, there are very few articles that are entirely unconcerned with the problems of historical

8 For example, Yeo suggests that, according to Paul’s text, the “presentation of imperatives as divinely ordained, without respect for an individual’s needs and context, is not an act of love” (Yeo 1994: 310).

validity in their engagement with Paul. For example, even if “evidence” is actually nowhere cited in Yeo’s article, he still wants to show that the grounds for mutual respect in contexts of religious difference are genuinely, historically Pauline. Johnson uses “evidence” nine times, although never to blast away at alternative ideas, while also suggesting that there is such a thing as “the proper exegesis” of Paul’s epistles (Johnson 2013: 198 n. 8). The 2005 special issue of *Biblical Interpretation* (13.3) devoted to Jewish-Christian relations, and by extension to a reassessment of the New Perspective, foregrounds such tensions. Mark Nanos’ introduction lays out, in his typically elegant way, the need to remain perpetually aware of the fact that Paul, or Paul’s voice, is always and has always been a construct (Nanos 2005a). The Paul-s constructed in the issue represent the work of “recent interpreters and interpretations” rather than those invested in more traditional approaches to the Apostle (Nanos 2005a: 222). And one of the key insights this work embraces is that “we are culpable for our interpretation of Paul’s voice, more importantly, for the way we use it, and persuade others to appropriate it, or not” (Nanos 2005a: 221). At the very same time, a core goal of biblical scholarship is “to achieve probable historical interpretations” (Nanos 2005a: 222).⁹ Neil Elliott, in the same issue, sees a couple of dangers in Pauline studies that emerge directly from the lack of historical probability (Elliott 2005). First is the ongoing tendency to privilege (after *inventing* Paul’s promotion of) Christian universalism over Jewish particularity; and, next, are the ways that this same dynamic can resonate with unsophisticated conservative American readings of Pauline politics (in support of the powers that be through a particular reading of Romans 13). Because history, he fears, is less valuable in such interpretation than “congeniality to contemporary cultural values,” we should decide to “stop trying to drag Paul into our own time and cultural situation” (Elliott 2005: 242, 249).

One could characterize Elliott’s imperative here as altericist, involving an assumption that the discrepancies between Paul’s world and ours are so vast as to render him an unhelpful resource for contemporary cultural formations.¹⁰

9 Later in this special issue, Nanos reflects that at a certain point in his own work he began “to recognize historical and rhetorical issues that this construction [i.e., that Paul’s debates concern primarily inter-Christian matters] did not resolve, about which I have written a monograph, but I also saw that it did not necessarily hold the ideological promise I had supposed” (Nanos 2005b: 257). So, just to be clear, “historically probable” does not mean ideologically uncommitted for Nanos. Rather, it’s a question of ideological intentionality in relation to historical data; one acknowledges one’s social, historical, and ideological location but still tries to uncover the history behind the texts.

10 I am drawing upon here work in queer studies, and specifically, with regard to *Biblical Interpretation*, upon Marchal 2011, on which I will say more below.

As Pamela Eisenbaum puts it in the same special issue: “this world is not Paul’s world” (Eisenbaum 2005: 237). The other approach to history would be to see and build upon continuities, and this is the kind of thing one finds in Yeo and Johnson, discussed above, as well as in Caroline Johnson Hodge’s contribution, which argues that our contemporary appreciation of the fluid nature of identity gives us (better) access to Paul’s own self-understanding than previous, pre-postmodern ethnographic and biblical scholarship would allow (Johnson Hodge 2005). Joseph Marchal finds both approaches partially useful, and so proposes as a “third way to explore issues of origin, continuity, and difference in biblical argumentation,” one that would think productively about difference and similarity, about the many possible “disidentifying identifications” available to the reader of the Bible (Marchal 2011: 373, 386). But when it comes to illustrating what such an approach would look like in an interpretation of Romans 1–2, Marchal largely sidesteps historiography altogether. More accurately, he sidesteps typical exegetical efforts to identify the communities Paul has in view, gesturing instead toward unidentified, internally multiple “they’s” and “you’s.” In the process Marchal presents a brilliantly complicated picture of a “they” or a “you” who might also be an “us.” History’s there still in this discussion of Romans, but diegetically now rather than referentially. And toward the end of the article, when he alludes to recent scholarship on the figures named at the conclusion of Romans, Marchal seems to embrace something a bit closer to the continuist position after all.¹¹

As an aside I might note that the few articles on the reception of Paul in *Biblical Interpretation*, even if they don’t intervene (at least not in any consistent or primary way) in Pauline scholarship or worry much about how history is reconstructed by the “classical disciplines of exegesis,” seem similarly interested in the kinds of solutions Marchal proposes. Richard Walsh’s “‘Realizing’ Paul’s Visions: The New Testament, Caravaggio, and Paxton’s *Frailty*” mostly concerns Paul’s visionary experiences in Acts (although a variety of epistles are cited as well) as these are interpreted in later art and film (Walsh 2010). The nature of those interpretations—and indeed the relationship not just between the Bible

11 Marchal writes in a note that he’s more troubled in some instances by the altericist model. In certain circumstances, declaring a radical historical difference between our world and that of the ancient text may not be the most effective means of “contesting normalizations or securing a more livable present for those who do not conform (enough) to hegemonic norms. One might also suspect the motivations of those participating in such trumping argumentative practices, for the implicit reward might be the leverage to decide what others must do” (Marchal 2011: 390 n. 52).

and later texts, but also between those very different later texts themselves—is what makes the piece so intriguing. Walsh is not out to highlight cognate moments in the history of cultural appropriations, but to force “an incongruity that demands thoughtful interaction” (Walsh 2010: 49). “Incongruity” produces a kind of “disidentifying identification” by suggesting the possibility of reading Acts and *Frailty* together, such that Luke’s descriptions of Paul’s divine encounters can seem psychotic but not entirely alien since, as consumers of contemporary cinema, we are weirdly drawn to psychotic visionaries in film even as we’re conscious of the horrors they unleash. A very different sort of reception study is Stephen Chester’s “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of Martin Luther: The Impact of Luther’s *Anfechtungen* on his Interpretation of Paul,” which undertakes a fascinating critique of the idea of “the Lutheran Paul” (Chester 2006). Luther, Chester argues (*pace* Krister Stendhal), doesn’t project his own crisis of conscience back onto Paul. Indeed there are times when Luther shapes his own personal narrative to match Paul’s letters, even when doing so means presenting a different version of himself, one that’s far less ... “Lutheran.” Luther actually reads Paul more often than not in ways Krister Stendhal would endorse, that is, as a biblical figure in possession of a robust conscience (Chester 2006: 522–25). And this suggests, Chester concludes, again in a way that is both continuist and altericist at once, that even if “Paul cannot be a contemporary for us as he was for Luther,” he is still our contemporary because “we are unable to perform the first, descriptive stage in Stendahl’s two-stage process of interpretation [i.e., determining what a text meant in the past versus what it means in our moment] without the intrusion of our own experiences or the influence of our own cultural context” (Chester 2006: 535).

In 1993, the year *Biblical Interpretation* was launched, George Aichele published a review (of two books, one of which concerned Paul) in *Cross Currents* and suggested:

[T]he [long self-evident] distinction between exegesis and eisegesis threatens to dissolve. First the New Criticism, and then structuralism, and most recently the various forms of poststructuralism, have with increasing vigor exposed and challenged the presuppositions on which the older theories of reading and textual interpretation had rested.... The focus now is on the ‘discourse’ of the text ... [and the] meaning of the text is no longer sought either within the text or ‘behind’ it (in some point of origin), but rather meaning is found ‘in front’ of the text, between the text and its various readers.

AICHELE 1993: 130

Here we are, 25 years later, and Aichele's review, like the rest of his work, is as pertinent as ever.¹² *Biblical Interpretation* set out from the same kind of commitment to new practices in biblical interpretation, providing young and established scholars alike the opportunity to experiment with what work in the field should look like. Yet even at its most cutting edge, *Biblical Interpretation*, at least with regard to the work on Paul surveyed here, still worries about the proper relationship of new approaches to historiography and exegesis. This is, perhaps, precisely what makes *Biblical Interpretation* perpetually contemporary. The scholars publishing on Paul in the journal aren't just fully aware of, but they also clearly *feel* the force of traditional methods in the wider field of biblical studies (much more so than I, given their training); nevertheless, they persist in asking the field to reconsider, to think more creatively about "the presuppositions" informing "the older [yet still current] theories of reading and textual interpretation" (Aichele 1993: 130). What's contemporary, then, is what's relevant to this persistence.

Biblical Interpretation, a God's-Eye-View

Leaving behind Paul now, I'd like to do something genuinely ... contemporary. Well, contemporary for some, impossibly futuristic for me. In this second section I will use sophisticated digital tools, examine the entirety of *Biblical Interpretation*, every word the journal has published over the last 25 years, including book reviews. I'm interested, as indicated above, in the question of the tension at the heart of *Biblical Interpretation's* mission, but I hope to get at the question differently now by means of something called topic modeling. First,

12 And Aichele still seems as hopeful as ever that the field as a whole is changing. "Until recently," he wrote 24 years after the review just mentioned, "the interest of biblical scholars in these ancient manuscripts [of the Bible] has primarily taken the form of text-critical and paleographical studies of their physical production, mediation, or dissemination, and the focus has been almost entirely socio-historical. In these studies the physical matter of the text has been relatively unimportant except as evidence of its history or genealogy." He goes on, in a way that returns us to Timothy Beal, with the difference available by means of "poststructuralist analysis of such texts [which] pays close attention to changes in the physical matter of the texts, such as the medium of communication (spoken sound, written script, digital pixels), the languages and alphabets involved (both ancient and modern), and technologies of textual reproduction (memory, manuscript, print, electronic means), and the interest is in processes of semiosis. Each of the differences between manuscript bodies inevitably signifies differently" (Aichele 2016: 47).

an extremely important caveat: the approach described below is little more than preliminary. What I am undertaking here is simply a suggestive look at what it can mean to use certain digital research methods to study a specific archive of scholarly articles in search of surprises.

My first tentative step in digital humanities begins, as I say, with topic models. In topic modeling, an algorithm sorts through the words in a large corpus of texts and, after multiple self-correcting iterations, arranges them into groups called topics—lists of words having a high probability of occurring together. Because the use of “topic” to discuss what is really a constellation of co-occurring terms and ideas can lead to confusion, it might be helpful to keep the following description by Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood, two English studies scholars, in mind: “[t]he topics of topic modeling are not simply themes; they might also reflect rhetorical frames, cognitive schemata, or specialized idioms (of the sort that Bakhtin conceived as mixed together in social heteroglossia); if they are capacious enough, topics may even indicate a discourse in Foucault’s sense” (Goldstone and Underwood 2014: 361). The discussion below would certainly be clearer if I could label topics with thematic titles, but doing so would imply a more robust conceptual identity than the topics in my model provide. Goldstone and Underwood, who use topic modeling to examine trends in literary critical vocabularies across 21,000 articles in a number of important journals over a period of 120 years, refer to topics by number and a few key terms, and I am essentially following their lead here. They note that one topic in their model, in which the words “social,” “work,” and “form,” are prominent, seemed to reflect Marxist discourse. But in order to be more comfortable about deciding upon the topic’s thematic or discursive emphasis, they first considered all the terms in the topic and then examined the articles where the topic is most relevant: “[t]he specifically Marxist character of topic 58 is made clear by a longer listing of its most prominent words (own, ideology, society, material, production) and documents (including several titles by Ernesto Laclau, Tony Bennett, Slavoj Žižek, and Fredric Jameson among the top twenty)”; other topics, they note, even ones using related terms, can be more “opaque” (Goldstone and Underwood 2014: 383 n. 32). Foregrounding such opacity is, for better or worse, one way of signaling the humanism of the digital humanities. No presentation of charts and diagrams featuring the findings of digital research can ever be meaningful outside of good, old-fashioned critical analysis, ideally involving some (typically messy) combination of distant-reading and deep dives into specific texts.

The model I used produced 25 topics, conveniently enough, and several of these appear in each volume of *Biblical Interpretation*. Here is Topic 24, for instance:

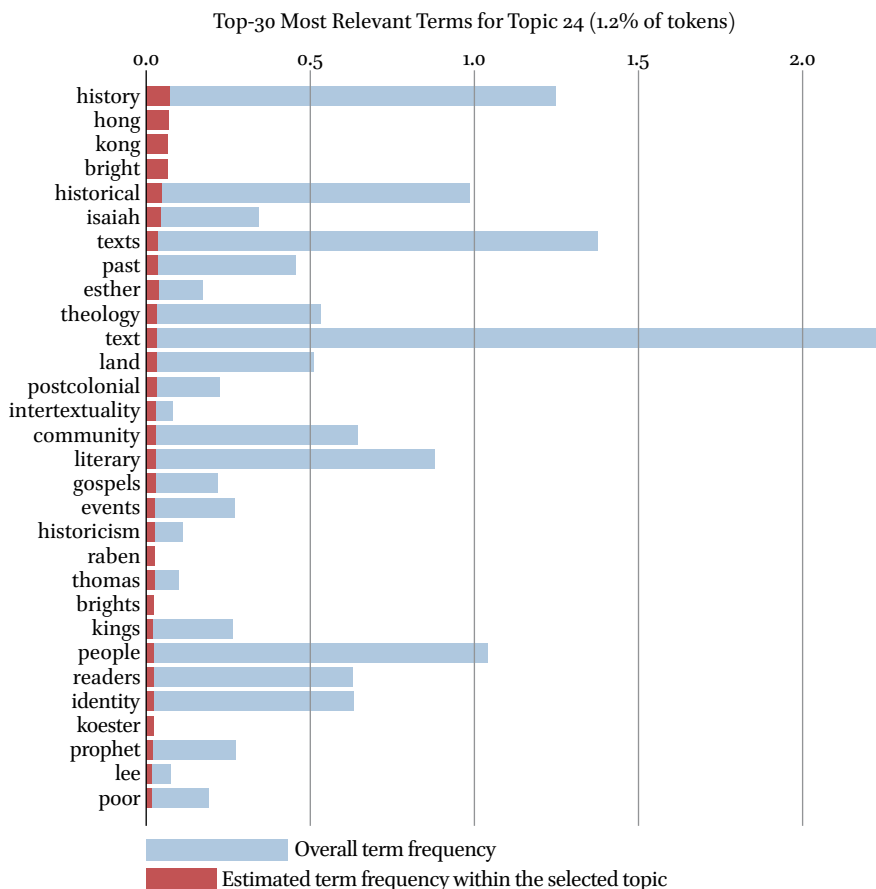


FIGURE 1 *Topic 24 (note: A “token” is an individual word)*

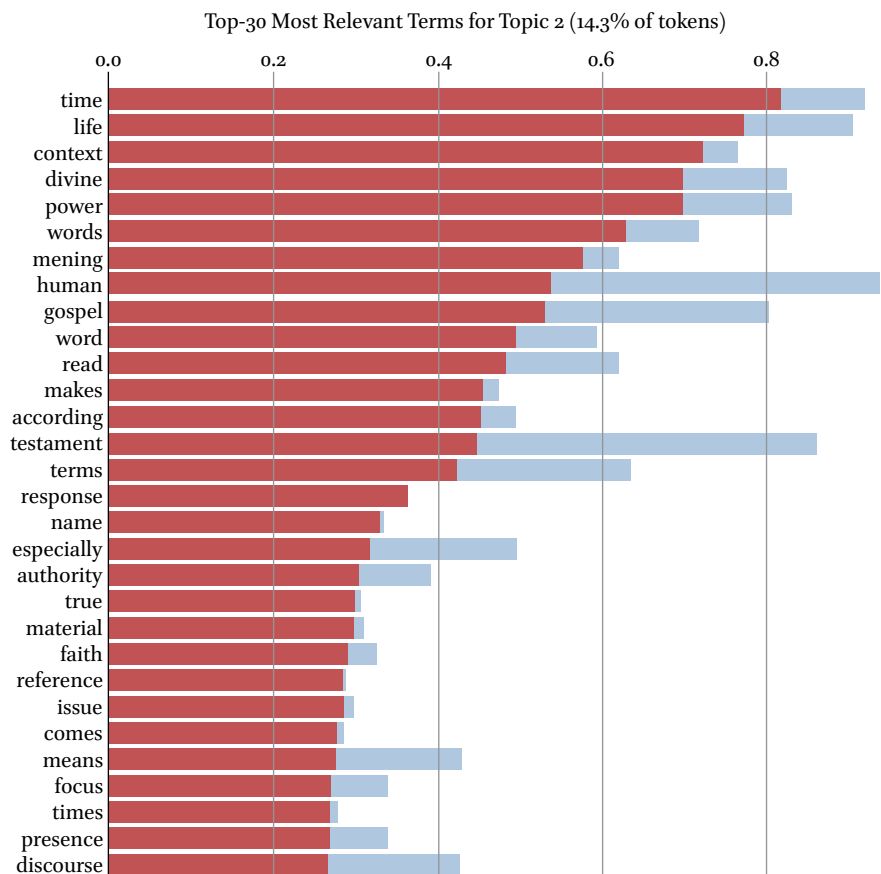
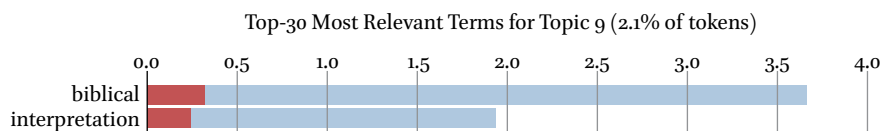
Any number of the words in this topic—including the most statistically relevant one, “history”—may occur in several other topics, but their significance changes given their relationship to the topic as a whole (the way words shift along their semantic range depending upon context, as in language itself). Here, “history” refracts other terms in the topic like “text,” “postcolonial,” “intertextuality,” “community,” “literary,” and “identity.” And this means that “history” is also understood in a specific, limited sense. Note also the difference between term frequencies. The blue bar indicates the widest possible range of uses of “history” throughout the *Biblical Interpretation* archive, while the super-imposed red bar shows the way “history” is used in just the constellation of ideas and terms relevant to this topic. This means, obviously, that the word

“history” will appear in more than one topic. Topic 10, for instance, which is also common to every volume, includes “history,” but not as the most relevant term. And “history” in Topic 10 is also not linked, as in Topic 24, to, say, “postcolonial theory,” but more generally to “interpretation,” “reception,” “analysis,” and “exegesis.” In a few cases in my model, it is possible to recognize, if only vaguely, a core concern. For instance, words like “song,” “songs,” “lovers,” “sexual,” “body” are prominent in one of the topics, suggesting an emphasis on Song of Songs. This topic (Topic 8), like those mentioned above, is found throughout the *Biblical Interpretation* archive, which may mean that Song of Songs (or at least concepts pertinent to its study) appear, somehow, in every volume of *Biblical Interpretation*, while topics featuring “Paul,” for example, don’t.

The fairly generic nature of many terms in most of the topics in my model suggests, and this is where I’m going, that neither contemporary approaches nor classical methods will be highly identifiable on the basis of theoretical keywords. And if that’s true, then the topics most relevant to what’s contemporary might hint at unexpected affiliations among scholars whose agendas would seem, at first blush, entirely dissimilar. Let’s consider Topic 2 in some detail. Topic 2 appears in 21 of the 25 volumes of *Biblical Interpretation*, and contains co-occurring terms with an especially high correlation between their sense within and without the topic. That is to say, there’s a very strong likelihood not only for discursive consistency and coherence within the topic but also for the topic’s legibility across the 25 years of the journal’s run thus far. The terms in Topic 2, presented visually to indicate their relative frequencies (see Fig. 2).

Granted, compared to topics that include “gender” or “Derrida” or “postcolonial” or “egalitarian” or even just “theory,” this list of terms may strike one as an inauspicious place to search for the contemporary. And, indeed, one of the few volumes of *Biblical Interpretation* in which Topic 2 fails entirely to appear, Volume 5, leans hard on Topics 24 (noted above) and 9. Topic 9, which is not particularly theory-focused, includes the statistically relevant words “biblical” and “interpretation.” As I noted above when discussing the discrepancy between the red and blue bars at the word “history,” you can see here that there’s something curious about the way “biblical interpretation” (not the journal title, but the academic activity) is working in Topic 9 (see Fig. 3).

Whatever “biblical interpretation” infers in this topic, it’s actually stunningly different from the way the same term(s) is/are understood elsewhere in other topics and throughout the journal’s archive. I’d infer from this, especially given the conjunction with Topic 24, that Volume 5 features a higher percentage of what we’d recognize as contemporary approaches—so, “biblical interpretation” in explicitly theoretical modes—than, say, Volume 10, where Topic 2 is

FIGURE 2 *Topic 2*FIGURE 3 *Topic 9*

prominent.¹³ To test such an inference, one might run a different model to see how words in any given volume cluster in relation to the terms “biblical” and

13 Volume 5 also includes a few articles in French and German; this must have played some role in the way topics are skewed. The algorithm sorted German words into a topic of its own (Topic 7), actually, clearly recognizing similarities within a subset of the larger corpus, the way it does with all topics. In some more perfect future, topic models like the one

“interpretation” on a vector bi-plot (which organizes the most statistically relevant words and word clusters along two axes). As it happens, prominent words falling between the axes of “biblical” and “interpretation” in Volume 5 include “intertextual,” “new historicist,” “ideological criticism,” and “criticism.” Running the same technique on the entire *Biblical Interpretation* archive uncovers “feminist,” “postmodern,” “appropriation,” “reception,” “historical-critical,” and more. But no such references to theoretical concepts or approaches emerge for Volume 10.¹⁴

Again, I’d like to emphasize that I am a novice in digital humanities work. My colleague James Lee (see note 1) and I hope eventually to use methods such as these on a much larger body of texts to ask critical questions about the reception of Paul. In this part of my paper, I’m merely noting patterns that are potentially relevant to my reflections on the ongoing tensions between contemporary approaches and classical methods in *Biblical Interpretation*. And at this point it is useful, on the basis of findings so far, to return to individual texts. Glancing at the articles in Volume 10, one will see somewhat off-hand quotations from Foucault and gestures toward quite basic descriptions of deconstruction, but also lots of classical exegetical practices and bibliographies that trend away from the theoretical. Volume 10, though, is where one will find Stephen Curkpatrick’s tour de force Derridean reading of the Pauline epistles (as discussed above). And while it’s something of an outlier in this regard, the fact that Curkpatrick’s piece shares this topic with other more apparently traditional approaches might make you curious. It did me. As a result, I opted to do something highly idiosyncratic. Slicing very narrowly through the volume in search of “true,” one of the terms in Topic 2—not the most important one, perhaps, but given our current political climate I couldn’t resist—I began to notice traces of overlapping projects of contestation.

- An article devoted to burnishing the reputation of a bit of Barthian exegesis of 1 Kings 13 argues that interpreters dismissed Barth’s reading only because they persisted (thanks to theologizing historical-critical methods) in making unwarranted assumptions about the passage’s purpose, which included providing criteria for establishing true prophecy from false. But what if true and false are rhetorical positions in a larger political struggle, the author asks, rather than normative claims? Notably the author claims that a new appreciation of Barth’s exegesis is possible, thanks to the fact that

used here might also think to translate concepts and so more fully integrate results across languages.

- 14 One finds words like “exegesis,” “hermeneutics,” and “reading,” but these are also common in the other vector bi-plots discussed above.

“many biblical scholars have been pursuing holistic exegesis under such labels as ‘biblical theology,’ ‘(new) literary criticism,’ and ‘postmodernism’” (Bosworth 2002: 377–78).

- Another article is somewhat anxious to insist upon the value, perhaps even the necessity, of truth-seeking in biblical historiography. But because the author adapts an anthropological perspective to discuss Judith, history, truth, fiction, and deceit are concepts that eventually blend and diverge in unexpected ways (Esler 2002: esp. 114).
- A third article detours from truth to ambiguity in a reading of John made possible by a focus on minor characters who, unlike Jesus in his clear dualisms, are not “distinctly drawn. Their presence comments on the dualism of the Gospel, undercuts it, subverts it” (Conway 2002: 340).

And so on. “True” doesn’t have to occur many times in any given article, and in some it may be used quite insignificantly (“while it’s true that ...”). But the point is that following this clue, after using digital tools to zero in on a specific part of the *Biblical Interpretation* archive, I was surprised to recognize that the authors of a spectacular and thoroughly contemporary act of Derridean Paulinism, on the one hand, and a modest, careful reassessment of an older exegetical study, on the other, might really be speaking dialects of the same language.

Conclusion

I’d not have been drawn to such overlapping interests without the use of a contemporary method like topic modeling. What’s more, even if these brief and relatively unsystematic, certainly unscientific, insights would need to be substantially refined if this were primarily a paper for an audience of digital humanists, my own happily naïve first go at digital humanities has modestly reshaped my experience of *Biblical Interpretation*. The two parts of this essay were written in sequence. The first section, I now see, proceeds on the assumption that because my work involves recent examples of Pauline reception (e.g., one of my *Biblical Interpretation* articles concerns references to Paul in Johnny Cash’s music [Twomey 2011]), I am best served by understanding the contemporary to refer primarily to scholarship that invests directly in critical theory. And, indeed, I am. Nevertheless, the second section of this essay, taking me well outside my normal experience as a scholar, helps me to see that the way that assumption guides my research probably filters out valuable

conversation partners. As Goldstone and Underwood put it, humanistic inquiry “always constitut[es] some figure by excluding some ground” (Goldstone and Underwood 2014: 368). A method like topic modeling, since it sorts and reconstitutes the ground independently of our presuppositions, can nudge us to constitute our figures differently.¹⁵ At the end of the first section I cited George Aichele, whose work has consistently challenged the presuppositions of traditional methods and approaches in the field. I’ll close now with reference to Maia Kotrosits’s *How Things Feel: Biblical Studies, Affect Theory, and the (Im)Personal*, in order to emphasize that this reconsideration of presuppositions goes both ways (Kotrosits 2016). Kotrosits’s essay, inaugurating a new project—*Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation*, itself an extension of the mission of *Biblical Interpretation*—is an enriching scholarly travelogue of sorts that introduces readers to affect theory both generally and in relation to biblical studies. In the meantime it exhibits, and so models, gratitude for the networks of personal/professional relations (here described in elegant, generous detail) behind intellectual work. Kotrosits reflects on different forms of, or different ways of framing, the contemporary/traditional tension, for instance, as “tensions between the empirical and the subjective,” where “subjective” can refer as much to personal feelings as to a “sense of history in its idiosyncratic detail and disconcerting nebulousness” (Kotrosits 2016: 15, 35). If both empiricism and subjectivity can lead to similarly productive engagements with historical data, then it’s not always going to be evident in advance how a scholar who works on biblical texts and is invested in contemporary theory will relate to the terms on either side of the “divide.” And it’s but a short step from this insight to a more sensitive awareness of “the serious epistemological eclecticism[s] working across [the whole of] biblical studies” already (Kotrosits 2016: 47).

15 In his contribution to the debate over newer approaches and historically-grounded methods, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp writes that foundationalists “guard against ... [interpretive subjectivity by setting] up a formal algorithm that minimizes, as much as possible, the likelihood of human contamination” (Dobbs-Allsopp 1999: 240). But I hope it’s clear that a key difference between the algorithm behind the topic modeling discussed here and the aims of a foundationalist criticism is that the topic model doesn’t posit meaning. God’s eye is markedly hyperopic.

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Certeau and the Two Ways: Digital Dissolution and the Demands of Power in Biblical Studies

Yii-Jan Lin

The preface to Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History* begins with Amerigo Vespucci, as he first sights land after a long voyage:

Before him is the Indian “America,” a nude woman reclining in her hammock, an unnamed presence of difference, a body which awakens within a space of exotic fauna and flora.... An inaugural scene: after a moment of stupor, on this threshold dotted with colonnades of trees, the conqueror will write the body of the other and trace there his own history.

CERTEAU 1988: XXV

The gaze of the explorer is also the gaze of the historian, which looks on the past as a separate entity—a separate, seductive body that requires conquering, taming, and colonizing. Its abundance of novelty—namely, proclaimed difference—entices the historian with possibilities: what is yet to be “discovered” in the past? What curiosities are still to be collected? What ancient narratives still to be constructed?

Certeau's comparison of the explorer with the historian highlights his argument that historiography is in large part colonization. This is most obvious in the discovery and collection of antiquities; a good example would be Constantine Tischendorf, who embodied the prototypical colonial explorer in his travels to Sinai in the nineteenth century. Backed by royal patrons, burning with zeal to discover a mythical object (i.e., the oldest biblical manuscript), Tischendorf succeeded in his adventures to present to Russian royalty the most complete and ancient manuscript of the New Testament: Codex Sinaiticus. As with colonial explorers and conquistadores, Tischendorf's dealings with the “natives” (the monks of St. Catherine's monastery) have come under scrutiny (Bentley 1986; Hobbs 1995). However, as is also true of colonial legends, Tischendorf's proponents have come to his defense.

Greek language expert and evangelical scholar Stanley Porter balks at criticism of Tischendorf as a “thief” and argues that the collector was doing no more than what was typical of antiquities hunters of the time and that all

transactions at the monastery were “legal” (Porter 2015).¹ While certainly explanatory in terms of what happened at St. Catherine’s, these arguments are less than satisfactory for exonerating the ethics of imperial acquisitions. Exoneration is, however, not the ultimate goal of such defenses; rather, Porter and other such apologists aim to preserve grand narratives, founding myths and legends of indomitable heroes on holy quests.

Yet, the colonialism of historiography is not limited to the collection of antiquities by hook or by crook. The task of Tischendorf the historian was by no means finished with the acquisition of the Codex. As a textual critic and historian, it is not enough to have acquired the data; one must, of course, do something with it. This formation of data is the more fundamental, subtler form of colonization Certeau equates with Western historiography. In changing data (primary sources) into the finished product of “history” (secondary sources), historians “metamorphose the environment through a series of transformations which change the boundaries and the internal topography of culture. They ‘civilize’ nature—which has always meant that they ‘colonize’ and change it” (Certeau 1988: 71–72).

In other words, the historian, like the colonial explorer, gathers data from “new” territories, amasses these in the archive, and then proceeds to analyze, taxonomize, and narrate the story of whatever “other” is under examination. In the case of ancient biblical manuscripts, these are collected—often from archaeological sites—to be classified and profiled like “exotic” specimens brought back by European travelers. Faced with an abundance of textual variants and diversity of provenance, traditional textual critics have sought an overarching narrative of unity and singular origin rather than multiple histories and incongruent, untraceable beginnings.²

The same impulse can be found in other subfields of biblical scholarship and in religious studies in general. Perhaps no better example of a unifying

1 Porter writes: “What Tischendorf did with Codex Sinaiticus was no different from what he had done with hundreds of other manuscripts, which was *in line with the way in which textual scholars worked at the time* and was questioned by no one.... After a detailed study of all the documents and literary remains of the transaction between the monks of St. Catherine’s and the Russian government, New Testament Professor Christfried Böttrich concluded that the transaction was *completed legally* and that Tischendorf should be exonerated of wrongdoing” (Porter 2015, emphasis added).

2 Regarding this pattern in philological taxonomy and promoting narratives of a single origin, as well as the racializing implications within the practice of textual criticism, see Lin 2016: 211–67.

grand narrative exists than James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890. In the various myths and rituals he surveys, Frazer identifies a single theme—the dying and resurrecting god—as the shared narrative emblematic of humanity's religious response to the natural world. *The Golden Bough* serves as a capstone to centuries of European mythography working towards an all-encompassing explanation of diverse religious elements, including newfound “data” from the Americas (cf. Kidd 2016).

Biblical scholars display the desire for unifying themes no less than the mythographers. Writers of the lives of the “historical” Jesus, from the eighteenth century to the present, attempt to reconstruct a coherent personality from diverse evidence, while others look for a story of early Christianity that makes sense of far-flung locales, texts, and polemics, with scholarly opinion favoring first one sweeping narrative and then another. Principle forces at work within these narratives are themselves generalities constructed from historians' taxonomies of the ancient world. Thus, coherent, explanatory interpretations of Paul, apocalyptic literature, church ritual, heresiography, and apocrypha marshal artificially distinct and particulate elements—such as “Hellenistic Judaism,” “Greco-Roman background,” “Hellenistic philosophy,” and “Rabbinic Judaism”—to support their narrative.

Perhaps generalizing categories are simply a matter of course, a natural response of the human mind when dealing with diversity. John Locke argues as much in his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

For the natural tendency of the mind being towards knowledge; and finding that, if it should proceed by and dwell upon only particular things, its progress would be very slow, and its work endless; therefore, to shorten its way to knowledge, and make each perception more comprehensive, the first thing it does, as the foundation of the easier enlarging its knowledge, either by contemplation of the things themselves that it would know, or conference with others about them, is to bind them into bundles, and rank them so into sorts, that what knowledge it gets of any of them it may thereby with assurance extend to all of that sort; and so advance by larger steps in that which is its great business, knowledge. This, as I have elsewhere shown, is the reason why we collect things under comprehensive ideas, with names annexed to them, into genera and species; i.e. into kinds and sorts.

LOCKE 1844: 255–56

The human mind may “naturally” tend “towards knowledge,” and, in the face of mass quantities of data, “its progress would be very slow,” but the human

mind need not work unaided. Technological advances have changed the ways humans can apprehend knowledge. Of course, one way technology has developed is simply to perform tasks humans already do with greater speed and accuracy. Organizing systems, barcodes, and catalogues extend and accelerate the bundling of knowledge Lock references in the quotation above. These new capabilities can augment historians' desires for grand, overarching explanations of the past, so they can continue being "preoccupied by the dream of a totalizing taxonomy and by the will to create universal instruments proportioned to their passion for comprehensiveness" (Certeau 1988: 74).

But technology can also advance methodologies towards which the human mind may not naturally tend, due to their seeming impossibility. Comprehensive searches, analyses, and algorithms not only speed up processes but also create new ways of *thinking* about data that can bypass or explode taxonomies formerly considered necessary.

While these two possibilities produced by technological advancement—the intensification of older methodologies and their obliteration by newer ones—seem to lead in opposite directions, the early returns of the internet age in biblical scholarship indicate otherwise. Rather than taking scholars toward diametric ends, digital research is leading historians to the same destination: the future, not the past. Expedited archives and new algorithms both lead to interpretations that are increasingly and explicitly ahistorical and constructed, representative of our cybernetic present and future.

The Way of the Open Archive and the Overproduction of History

Libraries, collections, and archives, as depositories of knowledge and wealth, have generally been comprised of amassed rarities that both justify and perpetuate the power of their owners (Friedrich 2013: 193–229). Like a hoard of crown jewels, each rare manuscript and *objet* signifies the exalted past pedigree and continued prominence of the family or institution to which it belongs. Access to the collections are granted as access to the royal court: privileges come with the promise to expand the prestige and honor of the rulers, while heroes of the court return from quests to present new treasures. Tischendorf and the Codex Sinaiticus are a case in point.

For the most part, archives continue to function in this way today: access to "the stacks" of the most prestigious universities are only granted with proof of affiliation or after application for permission, with requisite justifications that normally involve connection to another institution and/or a monetary tribute to qualify as a "visiting scholar." There are, of course, exhibits of the

rarest treasures that are open to the public; such open access, however, serves to not only edify visitors but also exhibit to them physical displays of wealth and power.

The boundaries of the archive, however, are beginning to dissolve in the digital age. The rarest of crown jewel manuscripts are being reproduced and digitized. In cases such as *The Book of Kells* or the *Codex Sinaiticus*, bibliophiles can purchase full-color facsimiles for a hefty if not astronomical sum (cf. *The Book of Kells* 2015; *Codex Sinaiticus* 2011). For the practically minded, however, digital versions of these manuscripts—and thousands of others—are now fully accessible online without the encumbrance of cost, travel, and unwieldy and fragile materials. Additionally, digitized versions and corpora often offer readers the ability to read transcriptions and translations, or to perform searches that are nearly impossible to do with physical manuscripts. In some cases, readers themselves can even participate in online projects of digitization by contributing their own transcriptions and translations (cf. Schroeder and Zeldes 2017).

Beyond online treasures of primary texts, secondary literature interpreting their contents—also a part of the scholarly archive—are increasingly available to the public on the internet. Scholars now regularly upload conference papers and articles, even entire book manuscripts, on repositories such as the Humanities Commons, Zenodo, and Academia.edu. Many of these repositories and most digitized primary sources are accessible without any charge or fee for membership, making the tools of traditional historiography available to anyone with an internet connection.

Of course, what remains unavailable to most people is the leisure time to peruse these materials or gain access to personal instruction on how to use them. Nevertheless, institutions offering doctoral programs in the arts and humanities have seen a 7.7% increase in enrollment from 2002 to 2012, with total enrollment of Ph.D. students in 2012 numbering 40,225 (Gonzales, Allum, and Sowell 2013: 58, 37). While an increase in access to scholarly sources does not necessarily catalyze or cause an increase in the number of scholars, both these phenomena reflect the growing democratization of the field of history and biblical studies.

The archive no longer derives or confers power through the rarity of its treasures or its exclusive membership. Scholars likewise no longer come only from select socio-economic classes; nor are they necessarily “classically” trained. But as the number of scholars rises along with the accessibility of sources, the viability or even possibility of an academic career decreases. The dissipation of the power of the archive in democratization has occurred in converse conjunction with the rarefication of the professorship, that now mythical existence

in the ivory tower pursuing the life of the mind without a care for one's daily bread. The Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) reported that from 2011 to 2016, advertised academic positions in religion declined by 20%, with only 300 positions posted in 2016 (Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion 2017: 1). As for currently-filled faculty positions, three out of four are not tenure-track but contingent positions (Curtis 2014: 2).

Before digitization and the internet age, the field seemed ripe for scholarly conquest of unearthed and unexplored knowledge in the first centuries with what is called "modern" and "critical" biblical studies. Biblical scholars, flush with new discoveries and methods, announced with hubris definitive publications with titles such as *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Strauss 1835–36), *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Westcott and Hort 1881), and *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Harnack 1902).

In the age of rarity, each of these publications seemed a step toward truth and light, adding another milestone of progress. Now, in the twenty-first century, the proliferation and inundation of data and its interpretations show that scholarship is not cumulative but tidal: analyses and conclusions ebb and flow, turning and overturning "discoveries" that number the grains of sand. Instead of building a victorious monument of knowledge with uncovered and precious stones, tides erode the certainty of the past so that the field, "which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams," seems more a "darkling plain... where ignorant armies clash by night" (Arnold 1867: 96).

The time when the singular gentleman scholar might pace his study as he composes the Key to All Mythologies is over. This is nowhere more graphically displayed than at the SBL's Annual Meeting, where thousands of biblical scholars convene, hundreds of whom enter curtained stalls in the Employment Center, hoping to grab the brass ring of an institutional position, even if it is a one-year appointment with a heavy teaching load far away from any metropolitan area. Employers, committee chairs, and the mere observer on the street who sees crowds of conference goers, with name-tag lanyards and meeting tote bags, are treated to the yearly festival of sameness: thousands of suited white men presenting hundreds of papers on the theology of Paul, the historical Jesus, and the possible ancient influences on the Gospel genre. For though a new era of democratization has begun, the greatest proliferation of scholarship has been among those already poised to benefit from it: the SBL member profile report of 2014 data shows that of the 5,273 members surveyed, 76.2% were male and 85.1% were white (Society of Biblical Literature 2015).

What the digital age has exposed—with its speed, accessibility, and infinite data—is not that we are in this critical state because the project of historiography has *changed*. Rather, historiography within biblical studies has remained largely the same, but its intensification by thousandfolds through technology has revealed the cogs and wheels behind the curtain. The hundreds of articles churned out each year are not precious, necessary pieces of a solvable puzzle but products of a machine bearing the stamp of the requisite markers of legitimacy: footnotes, literature reviews, bibliography—“a *play* with symbols and references that represent public authority” (Certeau 1988: 10). The machine is not advancing toward knowledge—if it were, should we not feel closer toward completion?—and it is being run into the ground with overproduction, with fewer and fewer returns in actual livelihood for its operators.

Historians may continue to insist upon advancement and “discovery” in the mission to appropriate and colonize the past, but, with the loss of rarity and exclusivity, its mystique has faded. What remains is the bare assembly line and production that displays the constructedness of writing history. To be sure, the production of historiography may utilize wit and talent, so that—instead of an assembly line—the process of scholarship may be more like a game. But the refusal to acknowledge the game or the machine pulls the curtain over a construction that is ever more obtrusive in its dysfunction at the most practical, life-affecting levels.

To be clear, traditional historiography and historical-critical biblical studies *are not the causes* of the current crisis in the humanities and higher education. Shifting socio-economic trends, including the dissociation of the university from the church, changes in industry—including the dominance of technologically led jobs and products—and the rise (and now fall) of the middle class and consequential shifts in cultural values, have led to the increase of biblical scholars while the number of academic positions have plummeted. But the conjunction of this crisis in the humanities and biblical studies along with the intensification of historiographical production and the resulting democratization of sources and scholarship have peeled back the veneer of exclusive prestige and discounted the claims of discovery and progress upon which traditional historiography relies for its self-justification and dominance.

Doubtless, many young students are still drawn by an aura of prestige and visions of old books, dusty manuscripts, and spiraling staircases in wood-paneled libraries or sealed caches in monastery walls, as well as the promise of the scholarly march toward truth. But the reality of the biblical studies job market, and the number of search results on almost any given Bible passage on the web or in a specialized database, drive home the massive proliferation of research

and publication on trodden-to-dust topics of the field that are conventional and acceptable.

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. This might not be the most palatable truth in scholarship, just as Ernst Käsemann's claim, "Apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology," shocked academic sensibilities at the time (Käsemann 1960: 180). But what was once unpalatable now seems the way forward: for new, young scholars and those hoping to expand the field, invention—particularly invention on the margins of "proper" historiography, including that once embarrassing topic, apocalyptic—holds the best promise for creativity in unexplored dimensions.

"Margins" here includes the usual, minoritized suspects of biblical studies, such as African, Latinx, Asian, and Native American hermeneutics; Womanist, feminist, and queer interpretation; disability studies; and anything smacking of "postmodern" theory. In an age of data inundation, the precious crown jewel of the archive is no longer the (only) focus of historiography; grand narratives also no longer hold water, as near-infinite data points present alternative stories and contradictions. Therefore, the historian now works on the margins of the syntheses of the past, so that new "frontiers" are the edges of the old grand narratives: "sorcery, madness, festival, popular literature, the forgotten world of the peasant, Occitania, etc., all these zones of silence" (Certeau 1988: 79).

The "zones of silence" for biblical studies include the minoritized interpretive strategies mentioned above, along with the heretofore embarrassing category of "apocalyptic," the sensational Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, ancient popular culture, studies of ancient poverty and literacy, magic, marketplace receipts, and aspects of domestic life such as family meal preparation. This work on the "margins" has been a boon to biblical studies, opening new avenues for research in a field full of generalizing syntheses. The increasing availability of data through digital corpora, archaeological finds, comprehensive subject searches, and the open archive promises that biblical scholars will continue to work along the peripheries of the well-charted and well-exploited for the foreseeable future.

"Periphery" and "margin" here are, however, only heuristic, for the more important and dynamic result of the digital age is not the shift in focus onto the edges but rather the exposure of all data points as marginal. The democratization of the archive, resulting in access to massive quantities of information, has blurred the lines between any necessarily coherent tale or trend in biblical history and points of "deviation." This is not to argue for the flattening of artistic value, so that any pot sherd has the same aesthetic impact as Sappho's

marble bust, or that a speech from *The Ephesian Tale* is as rhetorically sparkling as Cicero's *Quo usque tandem*. Rather, the transformation of all into the marginal has broken the link between what we consider aesthetically, artistically, or economically valuable and what we consider *worthy of study*.

The open archive that contains multitudes highlights the very specific choices historians make in their selection of subjects. In an age of rarity and exclusivity, choices seemed—and were, to an extent—limited. There is now no such excuse for focusing only on what was once a main attraction. What is more, the reasons behind *why* something was so readily accepted as an essential and important subject or narrative now often appears constructed from a series of choices with no necessary tie to innate or essential value.

European philhellenism and classicism is a case in point. As worthy of study as classical Greek literature and art may be, European adoption of ancient Greek culture and its purported values and aesthetics includes a series of choices—conscious or not—that rejects others as unworthy and inappropriate to the artistic and ideological genealogy the European bourgeoisie wishes to construct for itself.³ The rejected “Others” include Judaism, the Byzantine Empire, the Caliphates, and other “Orientals,” and similar rejections and alignments are to be found in modern biblical studies (cf. Kelley 2002), whose roots are usually traced to European, particularly German, scholarship of the eighteenth century.

Now, the backdrop of thousands of collections of diverse art, texts, and cultural objects, has thrown the work of scholars into sharp relief as clearly constructed choices based on exigencies more complex than simply the intrinsic worth of an object itself. Furthermore, the open, digital archive has coincided with the rise of poststructuralist arguments against the existence of the independent, self-determined Subject. Thus, not only do historians prowl along the margins (Certeau 1988: 79), but scholars now also deconstruct the very taxonomies and organizing structures of historiography and, in fact, of writing itself.

Certeau is himself a prime example when he, self-consciously and ironically, operates within the apparatus of scholarship while questioning the enterprise of writing history and contextualizing it within shifting sociopolitical structures and forces. Elsewhere, literary theorists and textual critics and editors debate not only which texts justify scholarly focus but also what the nature of

3 While philhellenism is mostly identified as a movement in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the use of the present tense here is intentional, since European (a contested term itself) identification with classical Greece and Rome continues.

text or “a text” is itself (cf. Robinson 2009). It is therefore not only the object of historical enquiry that has shifted but also the assumptions, parameters, and justifications of that very enquiry.

Similarly, in biblical studies, scholars have begun the contextualization and critique of the enterprise and the limits of the field. Witness Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood’s articulation of the biblical scholar in *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (2011) as a direct product of the Enlightenment. Consider also the pushback against the categorization of texts such as the Gospel of Mark as self-contained or even finished (Larsen 2018), or the primary orientation of Judaic creative culture as scripturally or exegetically based (Mroczek 2016). Included in these tidal waves eroding old taxonomies are movements in posthuman studies and affect studies that dethrone human and intellectual perspectives, creating disorienting new methodologies and aims (cf. Koosed 2014).

The age of the digital, open archive has facilitated the rapid proliferation of scholarship with both an increased quantity of data and its democratization. The ensuing phenomena of unsustainable growth in job-seeking academics, the pursuit and transformation of all data points as marginalia, and the deconstruction of categories and organizing principles are transforming the project of research and historiography so that the future of biblical studies looks vastly different from the former age of modern biblical criticism. The scholar-of-leisure in search of coherent narrative arcs that serve, in part, to justify God, country, and self, is now a rare breed. Instead, what we have now is the adjunct instructor, in between teaching preparation and interviews, searching the trash heaps for fragmented stories or picking away slowly but surely at the edifice of History.

The Way of the Computer Mind and the Silicon Past

The computer age has meant not simply *more* to study but also the advent of alternative, suprahuman methodologies. The digital archive may have provided the materials for an increase and intensification of scholarship but digital programming has opened the way for calculations and algorithms beyond our past capabilities. Applied within the field of biblical studies, technology can produce and has produced explicitly artificial and ahistorical results. That these products are then used and incorporated in biblical scholarship that insists on positivist historiography exposes the constant game and charade of academicians in a fraught and tenuous playing field.

The premier example of this is the current 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA²⁸) edited by the Institute for New Testament Textual Research (Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung [INTF]) in Münster and published by the German Bible Society (Nestle-Aland 2012). This edition, and all forthcoming editions, uses the text—as available from ongoing work—of the *Editio Critica Maior* (ECM), also produced by the INTF.⁴ This represents an important shift at the very foundation of biblical studies because the methodology used to create this baseline New Testament text is a fusion of human interpretation and digital analysis called the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM).

In brief, CBGM combines human, philological interpretation with computer analysis to create stemma—genealogical trees—of all available manuscripts to create an “initial text” (*Ausgangstext*) that then becomes the printed baseline text (Mink 2009; Lin 2016: 110–49). With CBGM software, textual critics can input their philological decisions (i.e., which text came before another in the history of hand-copying transmission) regarding *every* point of textual variation. All these decisions are then computer analyzed to create the most statistically probable genealogical tree of texts: namely, a global stemma. It is this stemma that informs editors when they decide what text and which variants to print as the baseline text.

In the minds of those mainly informed by the *Indiana Jones* movies and *The Da Vinci Code*, the discovery and deciphering of ancient texts typically involves a lone archaeologist or collector who, through mishaps and swashbuckling derring-do, finds the ancient manuscript in a secret crypt. There are echoes of such adventures in Tischendorf’s exploits and even in the seedy history of the forged *Gospel of Jesus’s Wife* (cf. Sabar 2016). The work of textual criticism is, however, somewhat more subtle. No doubt, textual critics *do* work with ancient manuscripts, some with beautiful marginalia, bejeweled covers, and colorful changes of hand. But the research that produces the NA²⁸ (which will presumably serve as the base text for the most-used New Testament translations) is far more careful and clinical compared to the adventures of the hero archaeologist.

First, the editors of the NA²⁸ are not primarily concerned with manuscripts but with *texts*. The age, provenance, condition, and decoration of an ancient manuscript certainly may inform a textual critic with regards to philological judgments, but these do not hold primary sway in the eclecticism that rules the NA²⁸, which focuses on what is written rather than what is written on:

4 For NA²⁸, this means that the baseline text of the Catholic Letters and its apparatus is taken from the ECM (see Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2012).

The state of text in a manuscript has to be clearly distinguished from the manuscript as artifact with its paleographical and codicological features. The relationships analyzed by the CBGM are strictly between states of text, not between manuscripts.

WACHTEL 2012: 129

This is in accord with the textual criticism tenet: *recentiores non deteriores*—that is, the text of a newer manuscript is not necessarily more “corrupted” than that of an older one (Pasquali 1962: 41–108). It must, therefore, be understood that the genealogical stemma created by CBGM does not demonstrate relationships between ancient manuscripts but between texts.

Additionally, these relationships are a *hypothesis* of textual transmission. Of course, most (if not all) historiography, especially ancient historiography, dwells in the realm of the hypothetical. What makes the results of CBGM striking, however, is the explicit statement of its creator and practitioners that the history of transmission it proposes is purely conjecture:

The objective is to establish a comprehensive *hypothesis* for the structure of the tradition. What can be achieved? We cannot find out the exact ways of transmission (“how it really was”). We cannot construct a stemma of manuscripts. We do not know the manuscripts/texts/variants which are lost—the links between preserved copies. We can *search* for the structures within the development of *texts*.

MINK 2009: SLIDES 35–36, emphasis added

Although the INTF and the editors of the *ECM* and *NA*²⁸ believe that the hypotheses constructed by CBGM are the best possible and reasonably close to what may indeed be the “initial text,” they eschew any *positivist* historiography because they make no claim as to the changing of hands (in terms of ownership and paleography) of manuscripts: there are simply too many missing links. They also refuse to narrativize the transmission of texts, that is, to conjecture as to the reason for a scribal emendation or the distinct characteristics of texts from a certain area (cf. respectively, Ehrman 2003; Streeter 1924).

What the scholars of INTF have made explicit was already the case: reasoned and radical eclecticism in textual criticism constructs—not *reconstructs*—a text, and an ahistorical text at that. The printed baseline text, constructed with the knowledge of all known extant manuscripts, cannot really have existed, let alone *be* the “initial” text or the “original” text (although that term is now out of vogue because of its impossible ambiguity [Epp 1999]). It is created in a context of machinery, technology, and data, and their workings cannot be

and should not be understood as a simulation of events in history, even if their production and essence is a form of historiography.

And yet, this constructed, hybrid, even cyborg text that is driven by both human interpretation and digital analysis (Lin 2016: 150–72), is used to corroborate conclusions of “how it really happened” in biblical studies outside of textual criticism. Philologists may have moved on from the search for “an original text,” but this does not necessarily affect others’ use of their research as such. Scholars come to rely on these most trusted and “scholarly” editions to confirm their positivist interpretations of history, despite the explicit statements of the INTF.

Nevertheless, CBGM and its resultant editions demonstrate not only what is possible but also what is becoming increasingly obvious with work on the ancient world through using new, digital methodologies. New algorithms, statistical analyses, and generative technologies, along with an inundation of data, allow biblical scholars to create interpretations and histories of transmissions—not just of texts but also of rituals, theologies, and movements. But these stemma and narratives, because of their methodologies and their cybernetic context, bring to the fore the constructive and decidedly non-reconstructive nature of historiography. It is increasingly difficult to deny that the product of our scholarship is artificial—“artificial” in the sense that we create it, in our present context, rather than “discover” it on the dig or in our dusty libraries.

The melding of human mind and computer makes obvious what was already true: there is no great distance between “contextual biblical studies” (usually encompassing all those “zones of silence” in the margins of biblical studies) and historical-critical studies. The former was marked from its beginnings as “Other than History” because it makes explicit its concern for the present—both personal and political—exigencies. But those insisting on a certain coherency in narratives and separable categories, particularly of the past from the present, cannot accept or admit that “history” is artificially constructed in the present and for the present. As Certeau states:

To be sure, historiography is “familiar” with the question of the other, dealing especially with the relation which the present holds with the past. But its discipline must create proper places for each, by pigeon-holing the past into an area other than the present.... In all of its labors, based on these classifications, historiography takes it for granted that the place where it is itself produced has the capacity to provide meaning, since the current institutional demarcations of the discipline uphold the divisions of time and space in the last resort.

CERTEAU 1988: 343

The classification of the past as separable from the present enables biblical scholars to pretend two paradoxical assumptions to be true: (1) that they *discover* meaning in their objects of study rather than create that meaning, and (2) that the parameters they have *created* for such “discovery” are the only legitimate pathways to historical meaning.

The collapse of these assumptions in the exposure of the artifice of scholarship is flatly denied by many biblical scholars, and their protests, which I will not “call out” here, often insist that such a collapse would mean the death of not only a guild but of “meaning” or “truth” itself. If historiography is only present and contextual, they insist, there is no point to it at all, and so they feel they must deny such statements:⁵

Technically, [historiography] endlessly presuppose homogeneous unities (century, country, class, economic or social strata, etc.) and cannot give way to the vertigo that critical examination of these fragile boundaries might bring about: historiography does not want to know this.

CERTEAU 1988: 343

What is almost never considered is the deep value of construction and meaning-making itself, the “vertigo” of perceiving the game of historiography, without resorting to claims of positivism and Enlightenment definitions of truth.

The Game

In the context of the open archive and the silicon past (programmed in the present), and the massive proliferation of scholarship, the future of biblical studies may seem bleak. Seminal scholarship seems nigh impossible, with particular forms of it appearing near obsolescence. Authoritative biblical commentaries, for example, assumed to cover more or less comprehensively the *status quaestionis*, are becoming an impossibility unless they declare an overarching focus to narrow its content or a synthesis of foci in essay form that eschews any claim of a *status* (cf. respectively, Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley 2012; Yee, Page, and Coomber 2014).

Anyone who has witnessed a swarm of insects or a stampede of wildebeest or humans can attest that multitudes can be frightening. Aside from the danger

5 The argument of this paper is *not* that historians can make no *conjectures* about the past but that these hypotheses are never separable from the present, particularly the context of the historian.

of injury and loss of life, multitudes threaten to extinguish individuality and individual significance. When the lone academic surveys the convention floor of the SBL's Annual Meeting and sees the swarms of biblical scholars, the value of contribution to the field seems to dwindle, along with the possibility of converting that contribution to a livelihood.

Why contribute when thousands already do? Furthermore, why pursue history and biblical studies if we are simply playing a game? It certainly seems like a game when scholarship reads and rereads the archive in tidal movements and not progressive ones. What can ever be achieved with such massive amounts of data and such infinite permutations and re-evaluations? How can these scholarly games continue at a time when higher education globally has embraced the neoliberal concept that education is a corporate enterprise? Would not confessing that we do not "discover" history "as it really was" a la *Indiana Jones* doom our schools and departments when institutional prestige, alumni giving, and budgets rely on such discoveries?

To these questions I offer one partial answer: biblical studies and much of scholarship in the humanities is indeed a game, but it is not "just" a game. We misspeak when we comfort our children or ourselves when we say, "It's just a game" at the end of a bad t-ball practice or at the loss of a professional championship. Our intention is to address the emotional distress of losing, but the phrase discounts the deep value of games at all levels. What we actually mean in these situations is: "It's just a *loss* in a game," meaning that no serious harm comes from simply losing a game of chess or tennis.⁶

To those who say, "It's just a game," and *do* mean that games, especially professional sports, are meaningless and vacuous, all evidence points to the contrary. Games—whether one is a participant or spectator—provide community, entertainment, and intellectual stimulation. Professional sports fandom is one of the few places where multitudes can be comforting, joyful, and reinforcing of the value of the individual.⁷ Games also provide the opportunity for social change, as with the career of Jackie Robinson, and political protest, as demonstrated by Colin Kaepernick. For those concerned most with the bottom-line, sports, from elementary school to the professional leagues, create

6 Losing in the *Game of Thrones* almost always means death or dismemberment, but that is a metaphorical use of "game" in (fictional) situations that *do* threaten harm in losing. The same is true of non-fictional situations when "game" is used metaphorically, such as in U.S. foreign policy.

7 Of course, the opposite can also be true: sports fanatics en masse can be threatening and negative, but this is hardly always the case. The same, both positive and negative, can be said of political protests.

jobs and generate earnings of roughly \$14.3 billion a year in the United States (Burrow 2013).

There is no suggestion that biblical scholarship could ever achieve the mass appeal, glamor, and wealth of professional sports. But the analogy of scholarship as sport or, rather, the *inclusion* of scholarship in the realm of games, may point the way forward. The identification of biblical studies with games and play illuminates several key truths in the face of the challenges to the humanities.

First, as with games, meaning does not have to be discovered but can be constructed and completely contextual, and still have incredible value. That is, just as games do not have to present “real life” to exist and provide value, neither must history and biblical studies find stable answers regarding the past “as it really was.”

Second, the results of scholarship in the humanities do not have to result in a “win” in order to provide experience, training, exposure to difference, and community. As with sports, even if one publishes an article that subsequently appears in a worse light after an opposing publication, this does not negate the value of having researched, considered, written, and published the original piece in the scholarly community.

This leads to the third point, which is that scholarship, as games, provide community and social movement. These communities most importantly insist on the value of human life, creativity, and interaction for their own sake and not a means to an end, just as games and sport celebrate human intellect, determination, and physical ability for their own sake.

For the most part, biblical scholars have assumed that if what we do is a game, then we lose the battle of profit and relevance in scholarship. We believe that our institutions cannot profit from what are not “real” exposés and discoveries, progressing toward greater truth and light, or that our students cannot preach from the pulpit or serve a community with validity unless they understand the “original meaning” of a biblical text. These beliefs continue the prominence of historical-critical studies and sidelines minoritized methodologies as pet projects and charity cases, since they cannot be validated. But the value of the game, of always reaching for excellence in the joy of creative play, is what gives value to students, scholars, and institutions who believe in education rather than the selling of a finite “product.”

I conclude with a few words from billionaire and NBA Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, who predicts a greater-than-ever need for the humanities in the future with the increase of automation:

[Computer coding] might have been a great job a few years ago, but you might be out of work in five years. We’re going to have a lot of displaced

workers—the nature of work is changing.... I personally think there's going to be a greater demand in ten years for liberal arts majors than there were for programming majors and maybe even engineering. When the data is all being spit out for you, options are being spit out for you, you need a different perspective in order to have a different view of data.

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The data and their analyses are ever amassing. The sport of biblical studies plays with history, faith, and meaning-making with infinite possibilities. Its future is only limited by fear and the resultant insistence on narrow definitions of texts, historiography, and method. In contrast, the admission that we play a game is not the end of playtime but a sustainable beginning.

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PART 2

Questions of Time, Place, and Planet



No Future for Biblical Studies? Or, Still Living with a Contingent Apocalypse as *Biblical Interpretation* Turns 25

Jacqueline M. Hidalgo

The trouble with a shallow gene pool, of course, is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g., political) change.

SEDGWICK 2003: 144¹



The 2016 jobs' report from the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion begins quite grimly: "Fewer institutions hiring fewer faculty spells an historic low for jobs in religion" (2016). Biblical studies still boasts the highest number of job postings of any field in religion, at least across the United States and Canada, but its numbers are now much closer to other fields, and the majority of fields have never recovered from the wake of the 2008 financial crash (Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion 2016: 9).² The report also suggests that calls for interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship have declined. When I was asked to write this essay about the present and future of biblical studies in honor of the *first* 25 years of one of the most important journals for interdisciplinary biblical scholarship, I could not get this report out of my mind. Ever since I was a graduate student, I have known that job prospects in our broader field are grim. Particularly focused on literary, feminist, liberationist, and minoritized critical approaches, *Biblical Interpretation* publishes essays from the only branch of biblical studies that I care about, but here is a jobs report declaring no future for interdisciplinary approaches and declining futures for the rest of biblical studies.

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- 1 I would like to thank Peter A. Mena, Giovanni DiRusso, and Tat-siong Benny Liew for reading over this essay and giving me feedback. All the flaws are mine.
 - 2 The one exception would be "Islam/Islamic Studies," whose numbers were never that high, but those numbers have at least held comparatively steady. Of course, this report examines only jobs advertised with AAR/SBL during 2016.

Especially after the inauguration of the current U.S. president in 2017, and despite an academic training that should caution me otherwise, my contemplations of the future so often flit amid a sense of doom. Even when I had hoped to move on from the Apocalypse, something I studied when my world felt less cataclysmic, I find myself taken up again with the “apocalyptic endlessness”³ that haunts the halls of the humanities in North America—a rhetoric that has preoccupied universities my entire academic career. Religion is not the only academic field experiencing this sense of declining futures; outside of a few fields, the academy’s assurances of reproductive futurity are in marked decline. How can one write about the future when one has seen so many great scholars leave the profession because there are not enough tenure-track or steady contract jobs? Might it actually be my duty to hope for no future at all?

Apocalypse in its fuller meaning, as unveiling of depth in the midst of crisis, persists as a usable mythic framework; here I hope to play in the midst of and alongside the space of apocalyptic myth as a font for imagining possible futures.⁴ Myths are not merely false or neatly fictional; sometimes their imaginative worlds and rhetorics provide the spaces in and through which we can reflect further on the complex worlds we inhabit.⁵ Indeed they can even provide spaces to wonder about our own desires to make meaning of and about the spaces around us. For now, I attempt an oblique identification with the veil of the Book of Revelation. I advocate here that *Biblical Interpretation* remain committed to biblical studies’ minoritized present, to those forms of scholarship that respect context, that are interdisciplinarily promiscuous, that refuse the centrality of the Bible as the only text with “real” meaning. I hope for a future where more of us as critics seek to build temporary contingents through which to practice other modes of criticism.

3 I borrow this phrase from Tat-siong Benny Liew because it so well captures the way that apocalyptic’s “immense multiplicity and plasticity” endures no matter how often the end refuses to come (see Liew 2008: 135).

4 Here I play with Adela Yarbro Collins’s older work, particularly with her examination of how myths can mediate crises and their “unwelcome contradictions” (Collins 1984: 142).

5 We can view myths as those stories that use an imaginative world in order to provide space to shape and reshape the present, to make meaning of and about a daily lived social world (Mack 2009: 54–58).

Textual (Dis)Orientations in Biblical Studies

My education and professional career in biblical studies, informed as it is by minoritized, feminist, and queer critical practices, has transpired during an era of diversifying biblical scholarship in terms of methodology and sensibility. Specifically, the past decades have witnessed the proliferation and spread of a variety of reading practices that rely on literary theoretical, particularly reader-response, approaches. Many scholars no longer presume stable textual meanings or the necessity of a historical focus on origin(al)s.⁶ One of the earliest ways I came to understand biblical studies was through Fernando F. Segovia's work of classification. He charted the modes of biblical scholarship that dominated much of the twentieth century, differentiating methods through textual orientations.⁷ For instance, historical critics treat "the text as a means to the author who composed it or the world in which it was composed," whereas other modes consider the text as "medium" or "construction" (Segovia 1995: 6). Segovia's essay outlines the way that varying textual orientations—the ways that scholars orient toward and are oriented from biblical texts—often differentiate their work within the field of biblical studies.

Even amid the proliferation of what Segovia dubs "cultural studies" approaches—those approaches more oriented toward the messy realities of the present, though these approaches still attend to biblical pasts—certain dominant orientations toward the Bible endure in the bulk of scholarly production, particularly at the guild's annual meeting. One dominant approach has already been extensively criticized and re-imagined by Vincent L. Wimbush, among others: namely, the orientation of "textual fetishization" with its persistent focus on biblical texts (as well as ancient Mediterranean/"Near Eastern" non-canonical texts identified as "Jewish" and/or "Christian") and the eras in which they were first composed and circulated (Wimbush 2000: 10).⁸ Even when scholars take seriously the constructed nature of the text and the dynamic interaction of texts with readers in various contexts, a scholar must generally still

6 For a critical race attention to apocalypse scholarship's concern with origins and originals (texts, authors, communities), see Liew 2008: 135.

7 My concerns with the problem of "orientations" and the way that biblical texts can serve as orientation devices is rooted in Ahmed 2006.

8 In the years following the landmark conference on African Americans and the Bible, Wimbush went on to found the Institute for Signifying Scriptures in order to shift focus away from practices of textual fetishization and to examine how and why peoples have engaged in such relationships to texts. In doing so, he also foregrounded and broadened consideration of "scriptures" as a category that includes not only Jewish and Christian biblical materials but also other materials.

maintain the centrality of biblical or related, ancient “non-canonical” texts to produce work that is recognizable as biblical studies.⁹ Even cultural studies approaches that are concerned with a reader’s social location tend to maintain the centrality, and thus some of the authority, of the Christian Bible and the dominant culture that fetishizes it (Lozada 2006: 114).

Biblical studies is a field only partially constituted by method. What we generally share is a temporal and textual focus, an orientation toward interpreting biblical texts better, generally in their ancient contexts. Often, though not always, scholars also care that their interpretations are found relevant to Jewish and Christian faith communities. To argue that there might be other ends for biblical studies—that is, to question whether we should focus on the “Bible” and to suggest that perhaps other scriptures and “Bibles” might be relevant to the field—is threatening because it could undo the field. What would we share if not the “Bible”?¹⁰ To abandon biblio-centrism, to re-center the field around the question of scriptures more broadly as Wimbush does, might be understood as “no future” for many current biblical scholars.¹¹ In my other published work, I certainly advocate for decentering biblical texts as our main or only focus; but for the remainder of this essay, I want to stick with the Christian Bible so as to see where other orientations in reading the Christian Bible, as one Bible among others, might take us.¹²

Likely because I am a student of the Apocalypse, I perceive scholarly work as frequently invested in revelatory decoding—a perspective on biblical texts and readers that not only maintains biblical centrality, but also presumes that the goal of scholarly criticism is “unveiling,” a decoding of surface signs either in biblical texts or in readers’ worlds. In this mode, scholars then make

9 George Aichele has observed that biblical scholarship still privileges the Bible when reading other things, such as film or aspects of popular culture, along with it. We partially presume that the antiquity of the Bible makes its meanings more “real” and more meaningful. As Aichele argues, a poststructuralist refuses such privileging of the Bible as the most meaningful text to focus upon; rather, we could read contemporary popular culture alongside the Bible, without privileging one over the other (Aichele 2016: 82).

10 As Liew argues, one should consider academic fields to be “institutions” concerned with protecting “turf” and policing “borders”; see Liew 2016: ix).

11 My thoughts here have some affinity with Hector Avalos’s critique of bibliolatry, in the sense that the field maintains a certain focus on biblical texts and materials even when there are good reasons to shift that focus; we both wonder about the sociopolitical agenda that inform scholarly foci on biblical texts. I do not doubt, however, that there might still be value in reading biblical texts. See Avalos 2007.

12 For example, see some of my other essays that read the Christian Bible even while questioning its centrality, work such as Hidalgo 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2017.

meaning by exposing that which lurks beyond the “veil” of texts past and present. Complexly engaging the evocative power of metaphor in her first book, Lynn R. Huber observed that biblical scholarship has tended to approach “Revelation’s imagistic language as though it is adornment,” as if the task of the scholarly interpreter is to “push past the layers of adornment to find the text’s true meaning, the ‘body’ of the text” (Huber 2007: 179).¹³ To some extent, because scholars particularly want to counter popular “prophetic” readings of Revelation, they often promise to decode the “real” historical meaning that lays beyond the fantastical and terrifying imagery throughout the text.¹⁴

Decoding the Apocalypse: Fantasies of the Symbolic and Biblical Studies

Huber’s own work models a distinctive reading strategy, one that attends to metaphoric function and to experience instead of searching for the “real meaning” through the revelatory decoding approach that I want to focus on here. The revelatory decoding approach, however, has a certain connection to the reading practices most cogent in the contemporary U.S. academy: those practices that Paul Ricoeur dubbed “hermeneutics of suspicion,” but that more strikingly have been branded as practices of “paranoid reading” by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In Sedgwick’s perception, these paranoid reading strategies derive their power from the way they seek to mitigate textual or historical

13 Given the imagistic and evocative nature of Revelation, it is a special case in the Bible in many ways; yet a shared logic of exposure may be seen to be at work in historical criticism in other places. For instance, historical studies that work to reveal the fictional nature of Gospel narratives seem to enact a reverse—but similar—trick to that of scholarly examination of Revelation; rather than exposing how Revelation’s metaphors are connected to “real” Roman history, scholars work to expose how the Gospel accounts are not historically “real” but rather fictional narratives. Both presume that exposing the “real” truth of these accounts will make a difference in how people behave. See, for instance, Shawn Kelley’s illumination of historical-critical logics around the Passion narratives, as presuming that revealing the fictionality of the Passion will end the anti-Jewish, genocidal logics that have shaped the Passion’s interpretive history (Kelley 2016: 48). See also Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner’s argument (2006) about how biblical scholars and Mel Gibson share certain assumptions about their ability to access and share “the real” in their representations of the Passion.

14 Greg Carey has examined the rhetorical back and forth between both biblical scholars and popular readers, especially Christian evangelical ones, and the ways that each imagines the “other” so as to deride or displace readings other than theirs (Carey 1999: 25–32).

“surprises.” Paranoid reading practices are not always bad; sometimes they tell us helpful things. As a Latina critic, I have often needed to read with paranoia, to look beneath the surface of dominant U.S. cultural claims in order to uncover certain historical truths that the lies of Manifest Destiny covered over.¹⁵ But such paranoid reading practices cannot be the only tools to serve us (Sedgwick 2003: 130).¹⁶

Within the metaphor of unveiling lingers a persistent marital logic, the unveiling of “apocalypse” (ἀποκάλυψις) is linguistically close to ἀνακάλυψις (from the verb ἀνακαλύπτω), the term for unveiling a bride (Huber 2013:1). Although the marital metaphor of Revelation need not be taken heteronormatively,¹⁷ it strikes me that most practices of critical decoding have been deeply embedded in heteropatriarchal perspectives, even when those modes strive to resist heteropatriarchy: critical knowledge of/about the apocalypse (and often other biblical texts) is that which we, as grooms, find by removing the veils from our brides and exposing the bodies that their wedding clothes obscure.

Though I do not think that this reading strategy is always bad or that it is the only one which scholars pursue, I would suggest that within it lurks a certain heteronormative tendency concerned with locating and connecting to some sense of “the real” that affirms and solidifies a reader’s identity. Here I am informed by Lee Edelman’s articulation of the workings of dominant, white, cis-heteronormative symbolic logics as embedded within a particular fantasy of symbolic unity (Edelman 2004). Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Edelman examines how symbols function as fantasies of the self and future,

15 At a Feminist Studies in Religion conference in June of 2017, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda described the import of perception and of unveiling truths we have not seen because often a shift in perception is required in order for us to change practices. Additionally, she referred to the import of bodily shifts in epistemological practice. Moe-Lobeda referred to the James Baldwin quote, “nothing can be changed until is faced” (Baldwin 2011: 42); I would note that Baldwin here does not necessarily describe exposing hidden truths beneath the surface of things. Rather, he discusses a process of bodily orientation (à la Ahmed 2006), where what matters is how one moves and orients one’s body. Here I find consonance with the embodied epistemology Gloria Anzaldúa describes, as I will discuss below.

16 Rita Felski also examines how the hermeneutics of suspicion is sometimes helpful; indeed, she pushes beyond Sedgwick in attending to how such hermeneutics can be pleasurable. But she insists with Sedgwick that suspicion cannot be our only mode of reading. See Felski 2015.

17 See, for instance, Martin 2006: 110; and many works by Stephen D. Moore. Perhaps the most intriguing is Moore’s reading of Revelation’s marriage through animality, see Moore 2014: 201–224.

fantasies that never capture the fullness of reality. In broader U.S. political culture, Edelman connects the fantasies of the Symbolic with the mobilization of a figural Child, a fantasy of a perfect future when the Symbolic aligns with “the Real,” when our identities will be unified. Through rhetorically mobilizing the figural Child, some human beings are refused humanity and denied full membership in the social order because of the threat these individuals pose to the unified future. Fundamentally, Edelman presents a striking critique of the everyday psychic violence entailed in dominant symbolic logics by arguing that there is always a remainder, a haunting disruption of “the Real” within the order of the Symbolic, a death drive that “queers” have been made to figure in more recent history. Those persons who refuse the promise of reproductive futurity, who fail to reproduce the Child (the fantasy of the unified self-in-the-future), are cast as outsiders to the dominating order. The logics of this Symbolic always already necessitate social violence.

In this dominant symbolic logic, I perceive a specific form of Christian temporality, one that registers a current existence as fallen from an idealized past of symbolic unity. Yet it also encodes a redemptive logic, a hope for a future redemption, one in which our identities are again made cohesive and whole, promised under the figure of the Child, or at least through a fantastical marriage. Revelation’s city-bride, the new Jerusalem, can register as another figure for this fantasy. Those critics who softened my view of Revelation by prying open the city’s gates as spaces of cathartic belonging affirm its sense of communal unity. They see in the new Jerusalem an almost ecstatic future present, a city where death and weeping have ended and all the disruptive social forces have been safely locked outside the gates. Even those scholars who decry the exclusionary practices of the new Jerusalem perceive within it this fantasy of identity cohesion, an ending to the Christian biblical canon as well as the narrower Book of Revelation, that promises a release from the conflicts of the present.¹⁸ Here is an unveiling in pursuit of symbolic, communal, and identificatory unity and rest.

However calm or cruel they perceive the final utopian plot, for many scholars, Revelation’s pursuit of symbolic unity, perhaps ironically, relies on a sense of interruptive transformation in perception; it may fantasize about unity but only by disrupting the present. Revelation is cast as the text of paranoid reading

18 Barbara Rossing describes the utopian future of harmony for the community reading Revelation; whereas Tina Pippin also views this future as one of an idealized harmony, but, à la Edelman, founded on proscription and annihilation of difference. See Rossing 1999; Pippin 1992. For specifics on the control of space in the new Jerusalem, see Pippin 2008: 161.

par excellence, a metaphorically vivid text that critically reads Roman imperial power and domination, revealing Roman rule as neither divinely sanctioned nor utopian *pax et securitas*.¹⁹ One can read the Apocalypse's revelation as a promise for transformation through transformed knowledge.

Some scholars have characterized Revelation as a communally paranoid reading of Rome in order that we, in our contemporary moment, may read the horrors of this text reparatively. Liberationist interpreter Pablo Richard, for instance, cautions about the violent imagery of Revelation, but he argues that the Book narrates "the hidden transcendent depths of history" to show that the world according to Roman narrative is false; Revelation, in other words, removes the veil of the Roman Empire for its readers to see a different world (Richard 1998: 26). This interpretation could be consonant with Edelman insofar as the dream for the end is radical; Revelation offers no future for the "first earth" (Rev. 21:1) that will pass away, a promise that the Roman "future stop[s] here" (Edelman 2004: 31).

Yet, even reparative readings of Revelation presume its paranoia as text and thus its need to be decoded, to be unveiled for us in the present. Let me give you a prominent example of how some minoritized critics read Revelation's metaphors in order to expose the "real" historical truth behind them. When I first read Revelation as a scholar, these minoritized critics helped me make sense of the text's metaphorical violence because they interpreted the metaphorical violation of Babylon as "really" about exposing Roman violence. Rome sits upon waters that the text itself names as "peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev. 17:15); here the text decodes the metaphor for us, describing multilingual and multiethnic subjugation as part of Roman domination. Others point to the textual depictions of Babylon/Rome as assessments of Roman economic practices and systemic inequality (Ramírez Fernández 1997: 97).²⁰

In decoding these depictions of empire, some scholars argue that the particularly disturbing portrayals of Jezebel and the woman Babylon should not be taken as literal women, but as metaphorical exposures. For instance,

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- 19 Revelation is often classified as a form of "resistance literature," even if scholars query the limits of its actual resistance to Roman empire. For instance, Margaret Aymer's dubbing of God's rule in Revelation as "alter-empire" because of its resemblance to the Roman empire (Aymer 2005: 145).
 - 20 Clarice J. Martin examines the list of imperial merchandises (Rev. 18:11–13), paying particular attention to the phrasing at the end of the list that Babylon traffics in "slaves and human lives." Revelation's phrasing fundamentally challenges an Aristotelian reading of slaves as somehow "defectively souled" (Martin 2005: 82–109, esp. 99).

Brian K. Blount writes, “Its violence and even its misogyny should be read in light of that overall impulse, and thus seen to be the vicious aberrations that they are—aberrations that mirror the world perspective in which John writes but are ultimately themselves the targets of John’s transformative vision, even though he was himself too caught up in that environment to see that” (Blount 2005: 115).²¹ These “women” are metaphors that expose the “real” truth about Rome and its exploitative structures; even if John’s vision is mired in the dominating perspectives of its era, the text ultimately calls for the end of oppressive structures.²²

Thus, even the violence visited against Rome/Babylon may be decoded and exposed as critique of Rome. The problematic metaphor of Babylon as “prostitute” is decoded as Roman “lasciviousness,” lust for riches and willingness to prostitute the great city for the sake of luxuries. Alternatively, Babylon as “prostitute” (πόρνη) may be read as another colonized woman; πόρνη may be better rendered as “brothel slave,” which casts Rome/Babylon as Satan’s enslaved prostitute, not even free to choose her clients (Glancy and Moore 2011: 551–52, 557; cf. McClure 2006: 16). Moreover, rather than Roman power resting on its dominating and penetrating masculinity, this decoding of Babylon/Rome undermines imperial masculinity because Rome acquired wealth through “sexual favors,” specifically by being penetrated (Royalty 1998: 192). Babylon/Rome’s imminent destruction through metaphorical rape and burning may then be decoded to expose Babylon’s weakness, that is, Rome’s fundamental insecurity that belies its propaganda of securitization (Huber 2013: 88). Again, this exposure of the Babylon imagery does not necessarily exculpate its violence, but these arguments unveil the surface and point toward a “real” critique of Rome beneath the vivid imagery. Many scholars also press the paranoid reading further and argue that Revelation merely replicates the empire it critiques by transferring Roman dominance to Christ.²³

Here I have suggested two layers of paranoid reading. First, scholars consistently read other scholars and read Revelation with a method of decoding,

21 This particular part of Blount’s argument lodged in my attention after Victoria Wang, a student in my spring 2017 “Reel Jesus” course, challenged our class to question whether such liberative decoding could ever help us move past the surface violence of the metaphor.

22 For Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, these metaphors also encourage resistance; see Schüssler Fiorenza 1998: 226 (cf. Rossing 1999: 15).

23 Consider, for example, the thoughtful argument of Lynne Darden that John’s subjective hybridity necessarily meant that he mimicked and replicated aspects of the Roman imperialism he decried (Darden 2015).

one that particularly looks for networks of ideologies. Second, in the case of Revelation, scholars have often worked to expose the text's persistent imperialism despite its anti-Roman views. Sedgwick examines how one of the assumptions of paranoid reading practices is that knowing the truth of the ideologies behind a text, that exposure of unjust power relations, will push us to make more just choices; paranoid reading shares in the presumed telos of conspiratorial thinking, that the end of such knowledge is resistance to the system about which one is paranoid (Sedgwick 2003: 161). In the era of "alternative facts," it is tempting to hope that the "real truth" will make a difference; sometimes exposing deeper layers or hidden truths is what we must do whether or not it makes a difference. But should we assume exposure necessarily leads to transformation (Sedgwick 2003: 124)?

Perhaps decoding simply embraces an interruptive function but promises nothing more. According to Edelman, a queer critical perspective embraces negativity and refuses the promise of recognition and definite meaning:

I call such a project impossible because it aims, with an insistence I link to the pure repetition of the death drive, to expose within the social something inherently unrecognizable, something radically nonidentical, that functions to engage whatever is, whatever is allowed to be by the various regimes of normativity to which, however, inconsistently, we all, as subjects subscribe.

EDELMAN 2011: 114

I might suggest that yet another way of reading the Apocalypse appears here: the Apocalypse as the refusal of Roman signification, a refusal that embraces only the radical destruction of the system upon which such meaning is predicated. Here, the horrific violations visited upon Babylon are the violent repercussions of dominant sociality. In his essay, "Who Weeps for the Sodomite?" Kent L. Brintnall argues that "Lot's wife takes on the impossible, queer task of opposing the divine will by succumbing to—and thereby bearing witness to—its arbitrary excess" (Brintnall 2017: 155). There is no future that should orient us; only the call to be witnesses. Akin then to Blount's interpretation that the fundamental call of Revelation is that of non-violent witness, Babylon's destruction remakes us all as witness to the violent excess of the social, an excess that wrought the violence of domination; we witness Rome falling before the same social and physical violence it has exercised upon others.

Edelman's critique of dominant logics does not merely provide yet another way to read Revelation; Edelman also offers a different relationship

to hermeneutics, one that does not orient textual reading around definitive meaning-making. Historically, much biblical scholarship, as with scholarship more generally, embraced the optimism of meaning that Edelman describes: “the perpetual hope of reaching meaning through signification” (Edelman 2004: 5). Problematically scholars once assumed that just following the proper rules of interpretation could lead us to a proper understanding of the biblical text, often an understanding that redeems the text for our present and provides access to a better future.

Increasingly, biblical scholars do not subscribe to the fantasy of cohesive unity, whether for meaning or for the field. For instance, Erin Runions’s “queerly sublime ethics of reading” presumes a fundamental “opacity” and “indeterminability” of meaning in biblical texts; here a reader starts without the “perpetual hope” for meaning (Runions 2014: 240). Runions embraces the disruptive potentiality of the sublime, even as she likewise embraces interpretive ambiguity and feelings of ambivalence. Drawing on Edelman, Runions sees in Babylon “the abyss of representation,” one of the Bible’s “disruptive sites of not knowing and impossibility” (Runions 2014: 242). Babylon instead figures a “sublime alterity ... disrupting the eschatology of the nation and the compulsory heterosexuality that supports it” (Runions 2014: 243). The failings to make adequate meaning around Babylon register Babylon the woman or the city as an ever-disruptive figure, complicating scholarly attempts at signification that would seek to straighten Revelation’s narrative.

Although distinct from Runions’s approach, emphases on ambiguity and the impossibility of final meaning in Revelation have also opened up reparative reading postures toward the Apocalypse, postures that do not refuse hope. Rather, they imagine hope comes from the refusal of knowing. According to Sedgwick, to read reparatively is to acknowledge that there can be surprises—terrible surprises, to be sure, but great surprises too. The past and the future are allowed to be other than today, and thus the surprises in both of them can be traumatizing but also pleasurable (Sedgwick 2003: 146). A reparative reading of Revelation here can see its vision as open to ambiguity and possibility; that its play with metaphor is not “*singular*” in vision but rather pluriform, that depictions of the character of the prophetic witness as prone to error means that Revelation refuses a “God’s eye view” but, instead, presents an epistemic humility (Hansen 2014: 166–67). Of course, such a reading still employs a mix of decoding, unveiling, and paranoid reading strategies. With Sedgwick, I do not reject decoding and paranoid readings; I hope that we think more about our orientations toward those reading strategies and the orientations that drive our use of those strategies. Maybe, with Edelman, we can be more open to

negativity, to reading without needing a telos of meaning. Hopefully we can also be open to other ways of reading, other ways of thinking about how symbolic meaning can function.

Disidentifications within the Veil

Although Edelman can helpfully push us to wonder about the teleologies we have imposed on our scholarly practices of meaning-making, his refusal of futurity has its own limits. For José Esteban Muñoz, Edelman's idealized future figured in a Child that is "always already white" relies on a "restaging of whiteness as universal norm via the imaginary negation of all other identities that position themselves as not white" (Muñoz 2009: 95). Edelman's logics helpfully illuminate some of the dominant assumptions about meaning that drove much work in our field, but those logics are mired in a binary conceptualization of norms and queers, of life and death, of futurity and negativity. These binary logics do not apply to how all subjects have approached meaning and the world, because these logics have particular locations in terms of race, class, culture, so on and so forth. Minoritized subjects might live within and between other symbolic logics, logics that can look like "no future" in a dominant perspective.²⁴ What about those who never thought that symbols aligned with or properly signaled "the real"? What about racialized and minoritized subjects who already encountered the world as split, who already knew that symbolic unity was a lie and that their futures have already been foreclosed by the dominant culture? What of those who do not necessarily identify simply as a groom unveiling the bride and exposing her to us as a font of knowledge? What about those who identify with the veil or behind the veil, especially, for instance, African American critics of Revelation?

As Muñoz has argued, through his turn to the utopian, queer of color critics cannot give up entirely on collectivity; critics can be oriented toward better socialities even as they hold onto the opacity of the "better" in better futures. In biblical studies, minoritized critics have, to some extent, already modeled some of these alternative relationships to Revelation (the Book) and revelation (the hermeneutic). In this section, I examine one prominent example, womanist biblical critic Shanell T. Smith's notion of *ambivalence* (Smith 2014). Rather than reading to unveil, Smith reads Revelation from the perspective of one

24 As Kara Keeling claims, "From within the logics of reproductive futurity and colonial reality, a black future looks like no future at all" (2004: 578).

who is veiled, who exists within *the Veil*.²⁵ W. E. B. DuBois coined the notion of “the Veil of Color” in order to think about how Blacks in the U.S. must navigate a twoness, must operate within and between two different epistemologies, two different ways of being, an unequal twoness always riddled with white supremacy’s creation and domination (DuBois 1994 [1903]: esp. 1–7, 115–31).²⁶ Smith contextualizes her reading of Revelation as connected then to this Veil; given her (dis)identification²⁷ with the Veil, her readings of Revelation are also ambivalent.

Smith is not interested in redeeming Revelation or in exposing its hidden meanings; rather, she reads the depictions of the woman Babylon as a mirror. She is drawn to Babylon as another woman oppressed by imperial and patriarchal violence; at the same time, Smith is also repulsed by Babylon’s participation in imperial domination. This ambivalent feeling of attraction toward and disgust toward Babylon creates an experience (but not as a simple analogy) through which Smith sees herself as both a participant in and a victim of contemporary empire (Smith 2014: 69). Smith here models an approach to Revelation that does not presume the most important knowledge is about the meaning of the text; rather, in reading with the text, she is reading herself and the world around her. She does not perceive a veil from the perspective of an elite groom, presumably the God-like figure of Revelation who lays bare the true body of the bride; instead, Smith is the person behind the Veil.

One could read Revelation’s overall structure, and not only the woman Babylon, as centering the veiled ones. If a telos of Revelation is an unveiling, then who and what is being unveiled? Since the bridal new Jerusalem is generally seen as a metaphor for the community, then might we read Revelation as a book that is concerned less with the knowledge that a dominating God finds by unveiling His bride? Revelation becomes about the experience of being unveiled, of coming to a certain recognition, a “self-knowledge,” as Smith argues. Following Eboni Marshall Turman’s reading, DuBois’s Veil is not a reference to the bridal veil but actually to the temple veil that separates the Holy

25 When I use “Veil” with a capital “V,” I am generally referring to DuBois’s sense of the “Veil of Color.” The lower case “v” refers to other “veils,” including the temple “veil.”

26 Eboni Marshall Turman has observed that privilege shapes the seeming fluidity of DuBois’s notion because he was able to navigate between white and black societies, something that darker skinned, less well educated, and more working class African Americans could not have done. Nevertheless, for DuBois, the Veil remains an entrapment by white gazes (Turman 2013: 75).

27 Here I am drawing on José Esteban Muñoz’s earlier work on a queer-of-color process of disidentification that inhabits, challenges, and remakes the locus of identification (Muñoz 1999).

of Holies as sacred space from a profane exterior world (Turman 2013: 77–78). Revelation's unveiling of a city without a temple, where the separating veil no longer exists, may reorient Revelation as the unveiling of minoritized peoples who exist beyond the Veil.²⁸

In this reading of the Apocalypse, the audience is not only called to bear witness but also to be witnessed. The community figured by the new Jerusalem is perhaps then not Lot's Wife bearing witness to social violence. Instead, the Book of Revelation concludes with the people whose experiences of violence we are asked to bear witness to. With Smith, those on the other side of the Veil are summoned to a self-recognition, one that reveals the Veil. For Sara Ahmed, the critic is not the one who removes the veil, stripping the other side: "The veil is not unveiled to reveal the truth; the veil is revealed, which is a revelation that must be partial and flawed" (Ahmed 2010: 166). Smith is not the only biblical scholar to engage in such a reading. Harry O. Maier, for instance, likewise reads the Apocalypse as a revelation of the veil: "It is to read the Apocalypse as a revelation, not of what is to come but of present structures of domination and tyranny—as a revelation of empire and one's place within it" (2002: 37–38). The difference, however, is that Smith's work does not necessarily place primacy on the Apocalypse's revelation of imperial structures; rather, her primacy is on how thinking with the Apocalypse's veil can impact the ways we think about the structures of our world.

This approach to revelation, one that is not just about pulling back the veil but rather revealing a veil and, in so doing, allowing oneself a fleeting sense of recognition has cogency beyond Smith's womanist scholarship on Revelation. This approach to veils and unveiling can also be observed in Chicana literary mobilizations of notions of revelation. For instance, Cherrie Moraga concludes her collection of prose and poetry, *The Last Generation*, by imagining Chicana artists as those who can remove the veil of "white masks" from their own faces and gaze into an "obsidian mirror" (Moraga 1993: 192). Gil Cuadros's short story, "Sight," follows a man who loses his sight because of AIDS, but even as he comes to see the world differently, so too do his neighbors see him differently. In the end of "Sight," the blind AIDS patient seems to lay dying, and he is the one from whom the veil is removed. Yet, the story's conclusion does not simply imagine unveiling as the teleology that ends life; rather, the main character who is blind focuses on and disidentifies with the veil (Cuadros 1994: 99). Reading with veils and the Veil for these authors represents a practice of

28 For a discussion of how the new Jerusalem may be understood as the transposition of temple into text, see my argument in Hidalgo 2016b: 86–90.

desire, a quest for self-knowledge and recognition. Yet these authors presume themselves to be split subjects who are not cohesive.

Words as Cables on a Bridge, or Other Ways of Reading²⁹

Reading alongside Edelman, unveiling, no matter who is being unveiled, maintains a heteronormative fantasy of reproductive futurity because it provides for a telos that preserves a fantasy of the subject as unified and unifiable, a possible future in which the Veil of Color or the white mask may be removed, and a truer self may be articulated and experienced. Yet, Edelman himself does not completely abandon notions of revelation. Although I would not necessarily suggest that Edelman's appeal to "no future" is apocalyptic, some of his own logic posits the revelatory power of negativity as meaningful even if he hopes for no "aftering," no teleology for that revelation. For instance, he argues that negativity "displaces what we thought we knew or could reliably predict and reveals the presence of something else at work in the decisions, desires, and acts we think of as our own" (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 15). Significantly here, he articulates revelation as being both a loosening of senses of singular subjectivity—something apparent in Smith's work—and he also describes this revelation as "displacement," as involving movement.

Even though Edelman's approach to negativity refuses any hope or politics that might emerge from his reading, I read him alongside minoritized critics as a prod to practice a more open relationship with words, and particularly those words that people define as "the Word of God." Inspired by Jean-Pierre Ruiz and his emphasis on reading the Bible with and among *People on the Move* (Ruiz 2011), then, I wish to further elaborate reading orientations that care about movement but do not render biblical texts as central to that movement. Here I draw on Gloria Anzaldúa's approach to words as cables on a bridge. I assert that, however diverse our methods, an orientation toward knowledge-in-movement might allow us to bring together those reading practices that do not presume stable meaning can be found in texts. Even if global capitalist hegemonies benefit from fantasies of mobile knowledge, and even though mobility is not always liberatory and it is often a privileged choice (some experience enforced mobility and others experience enforced immobility; to choose mobility is to have privileges in our current world), the sense that knowledge

29 Here I point to the evocative edited volume on the many varying modes of reading the Bible that might be possible when African women's practices are centered, see Dube (ed.) 2001.

moves and is part of movement seems critical to minoritized biblical scholarship in the present and the future so that such scholarship can continue to embrace contextual interpretation without reifying contexts.

Anzaldúa's approach to knowledge is not completely distinct from the varying practices of revelation I have discussed above. She suggests that *la facultad*, a kind of sixth sense, sees beneath the surface and finds a "deep structure" that is not always known at first glance and that can also only be seen by some (Anzaldúa 1987: 38). Anzaldúa describes the process of coming to knowledge as taking place within the Coatlicue state, a state of struggle with and through a serpent/goddess figure in Nahua thought. She imagines that the pursuit of knowledge entails a struggle (*lucha*) that leads to pieces of a fragmented self being drawn back to some sort of center that incorporates a feeling of completion (Anzaldúa 1987: 51). Akin to DuBois, Anzaldúa presumes a fractured, racialized subject but one who may yet journey toward a revelation of a whole, cogent, and cohesive subject. Perhaps problematically from Edelman's perspective, Anzaldúa suggests that *la lucha* must eventually find rest: "One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place" (Anzaldúa 1987: 63).³⁰

Yet she works to distance herself from precisely that form of signification that Edelman critiques: "In trying to become 'objective,' Western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing 'touch' with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence" (Anzaldúa 1987: 37). One can imagine older biblical interpretive practices of unveiling as presuming this epistemic violence, that the groom stays at a remove from an unveiled bride, only touching the veil but keeping the scholarly self completely separate from the ultimate object of scrutiny. Anzaldúa may have fantasized about a subject made whole, but she does not imagine a subject who can be neatly separated from what she studies. Moreover, Anzaldúa employs tactile metaphors of knowledge that move past the ocularcentrism that tends to render Western knowledge as a practice of distanced sight. To be sure, touch can open up its own epistemic problems (for instance, how and when can others consent to be touched), but the touch of connection between subject and object fractures the subject by blurring the lines between subject and object and refusing the distance of vision.³¹

30 In part, for those who have been denied a fantasy of a whole self, then fantasies of completion can serve important functions, even if those fantasies are never the end of a story. See discussion of this in Rodríguez 2014: 138.

31 I would like to thank the students who took up this question in my spring 2017 "Queer Temporalities" course, particularly Olivia Goodheart, Max Harmon, Nico MacDougall,

Coming to knowledge for Anzaldúa is also a “crossing:” “‘Knowing’ is painful because after ‘it’ happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (Anzaldúa 1987: 48). The subject is no longer cohesive, and knowledge here is presented as a movement that is not always a teleology. Rather than revealing or being revealed, knowledge here is a praxis of changing locations, a praxis that is ambivalent and fraught with peril.

Biblical texts can be engaged in and for this sort of crossing. For Anzaldúa, written words are performances “encapsulated in time” (Anzaldúa 1987: 67).³² In womanist and feminist interpretation, John’s Apocalypse is ever present as a “site of struggle” (Schüssler Fiorenza 2007: 265). Words change as they get taken up and read (aloud or silently). Words matter not as the stable loci we decode for meaning but rather as “cables” supporting a “bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge” (Anzaldúa 1987: 69). We read words not as central to, but as part of our experience of crossing, of moving between places. As cables on a bridge, words are suspended between places; they are supportive structures for *nepantla*—the in-between space—but they are not final signifiers. One can identify something of Anzaldúa’s approach in post-structuralist biblical scholarship and postmodern turns that do not identify the sign with the signified. Anzaldúa’s form of reading might also be seen as reparative, precisely because it opens itself to moments of integration when *la lucha* pauses. I lift up Anzaldúa’s orientation to words as cables on a bridge, however, because it exemplifies my main hope for any sort of future in biblical studies, that we read many different things, in many different ways, but we should shift our attention to questions of orientation, to what and how we read, to how we come to what we read and where we want such readings to take us. Our readings are cables on a bridge that carries us between places. We must never mistake what we read, or the readings we offer, for the bridge itself.

Here I am only echoing other prominent minoritized biblical critics. I am not arguing for an end to all dominant modes of interpretation, but an end to their presumed ends: I want no future for interpretive arrogance requiring a finality of meaning, a unity of identity. As Wimbush once articulated, “This

Jaqueline Serrano Aguilar, and Suiyi Tang. Conversations with them pushed me to understand better the erotic and the fragmented self in Anzaldúa; they found Anzaldúa as conversant within but critical of the sexual and symbolic universe endemic to Edelman.

- 32 I find consonance with how Liew presents the Bible as an “open text” with many “points of departure,” as something that we encounter and change because of who we are when we read the text. But the text can also change us. Neither we nor the Bible remain static in this encounter. See Liew 2008: xxi.

essay is a challenge not to read less but more; it is a challenge to read more widely and deeply" (Wimbush 2000: 21).³³ Or, as Muñoz would have it, "It is an invitation to desire differently, to desire more, to desire better" (Muñoz 2009: 189). After Anzaldúa, I might see the new Jerusalem, and its broader Book, as the city suspended between time, bridging heaven and earth, an encapsulated ever-present crossing. Its words are not the end to which we should orient our work; its words are among the many words that hold up the bridges we cross as we move between different places. I seek the proliferation of an already persistent but minoritized form of biblical studies, one that no longer centers the text or the meanings we make in decoding it. As other Latino critics such as Jean-Pierre Ruiz and Francisco Lozada, Jr. have argued, Latinx biblical scholarship must take seriously a notion of revelation that does not center biblical words and texts as the only source of knowledge.³⁴ Rather, the text is a jumping off point for other thoughts, and the Bible can slip and slide past other texts without dominating them. Letting go of biblical domination may seem like an end to the field; we also may be terrified by the 2016 jobs report, and we must seek more just employment practices for our graduate students and ourselves. But since biblical texts are cables on bridges that take us elsewhere, a more adaptive scholarship should be open to the different places we might go. The future of biblical criticism may not be found in the Anglophone or the North American academy.

In cultivating a relationship to words—particularly "the Word"—that does not authorize them with final power, I am moved by Edelman's challenge, but I break with his call to revel in anti-social negativity. I still hope that we undertake this work in order to reach from our contextual knowledges-in-movement and connect strategically with others, especially in these trying times. As Runions describes it, "some kind of collectivity might be forged across the fragments of time and self. It is a connectivity that acknowledges the impossibility of difference" (2014: 245). I imagine we might bring different minoritized, feminist, queer, and cultural studies critics together under a hermeneutics of "contingency," as Joseph A. Marchal describes it; we recognize

33 Similarly, as Segovia advocated in his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, "Rather, its activation and transformation, theoretical as well as empirical, demand a plurality of knowledges and, ultimately, a general theory that accounts for the impossibility of a general theory. Only through such a plurality of knowledges, grounded in their own historical trajectories and not the universal history of the West, can a vision of utopia arise for the future of the world" (Segovia 2015: 24).

34 Lozada has argued for the "aim to de-center and de-authorize the biblical tradition," to cease treating the Bible as the center for interpretive study (Lozada 2006: 115). Jean-Pierre Ruiz further articulates a theology of "revelation" that sees daily lived experiences as equal to "the Word" as sites through which we come to make meaning (Ruiz 2009: 63).

that our critical readings alongside biblical worlds are “contingent.” We see such readings as adjectivally limited, temporary, placed; but we also think that with and through them we can sometimes form a transtemporal, transcultural, and transpatial contingent, as a noun, as a community of allies for the moment (Marchal 2011: 394).³⁵ Contingent criticism recognizes that the majority of faculty are contingent. Contingent criticism refuses the totalizing nature of an Edelman-style “anti-social critique,” but this practice would not reject the anti-social critique altogether. Our hermeneutics remain contingent, not wedded to any particular future. We take up the strategies we need, when we need them, accepting that our readings and our ways of reading are temporary and mutable.

For 25 years, *Biblical Interpretation* has been one of the best and few places for practicing contingent criticism and for allowing readers to come together contingently. It is one of the few places where scholars can assume the contextual nature of all interpretation rather than waste time and space making the case for contingency; *Biblical Interpretation* is a rare place where scholarly practices are open, through literary methods, to failures in making meaning or making sense of biblical texts. It has also been a space where people might have other sorts of conversations around biblical texts, such as looking at reception histories or what happens when reading the Bible with and through other media. This journal provides valuable space where many different ways of reading the Bible, reading with the Bible, and reading near the Bible may brush up against each other.

Even if I sometimes look at the jobs report and think that there is no future for biblical studies in the North American academy, I cannot let go of wanting some sort of future for the field. I hope for more spaces like *Biblical Interpretation* that allow further proliferation of what, why, and how we read (perhaps, someday, the journal will publish articles in the languages of the global South). I hope that we might be open more to textual mingling, to seeing what happens when the Bible becomes one text to touch, one space to play around, but just one space among others; perhaps we might even let go of needing a teleology, of needing such play to necessarily get us somewhere “productive” in terms of either a better history or a more liberative theology. Maybe it is enough if work just takes us some place different, however contingently.

35 Maia Kotrosits has also argued for “a willingness to notice the serious epistemological eclecticism working across biblical studies—or, differently said, our intellectual incoherence to ourselves, in which the ‘I’ is constantly mediating and trying to contain uncontainable experience ... while at the same time we long to make contact with, to touch, something outside of ourselves” (Kotrosits 2016: 47).

In our current political moment and in the face of “alternative facts,” we may desire the sort of certainty that seemingly adheres to those old practices of decoding—those practices that are most at home in particular elite academies in Europe and European outposts. However, I began this essay with an epigraph from Sedgwick that suggests that we, as scholars, have done a poor job of predicting or adapting to our endlessly apocalyptic present(s). Perhaps, then, the answer is to actually try to diversify our gene pool rather than claim to do so: we can practice an openness to ambiguity; to a greater diversity of interpreters, interpretive modes, and interpretive locations; to more interdisciplinarity, not less. I am committed to a future that may look like no future for some, because I wish for a future that does not look like the present, a future that breaks with the centrality of dominant modes of veiling and unveiling knowledge and provides space for other ways of engaging with texts and with each other.

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Postcolonializing the Bible with a Little Help from Derek Walcott

Steed Vernyl Davidson

The academic world in general may have greeted the advent of postcolonial studies with caution, but its adherents expressed great expectations at its advent. From the general field of postcolonial studies, Neil Lazarus describes postcolonial studies with its deeply political potentials as “a self-consciously *progressive* or *radical* initiative” (Lazarus 2011: 11, emphasis original). The initial enthusiasm in biblical studies appears in R. S. Sugirtharajah’s assessment of postcolonial studies as one of the most “notoriously argumentative critical categories of our time” (Sugirtharajah 2002: 1). Despite early excitement, by the end of the previous millennium, postcolonial studies came to be “stereotyped as an acceptable form of academic radicalism” (Seshadri-Crooks 2000: 17). The undoubted malaise in postcolonial studies at the start of the twenty-first century has seemingly abated with the publication of major works that offer a reset of the field (Young 2015) as well as titles that brim with confidence (Zabus 2015). Biblical practitioners should entertain and promote a similar reset. This exploratory essay aims to stimulate such a movement.

Biblical scholarship that breaks out of the rigid confines of the discipline always struggle for identity. How much of the basic questions and presuppositions of the field must be utilized in order to qualify as biblical scholarship stands as a consistent question and critique in a field “that ... is *obsessed with* method and as such *possessed by* method” (Moore and Sherwood 2011: 33, emphasis original). Yet at the same time, the drive to innovate biblical studies, a field that has largely drawn its identity from other fields, can easily be stymied by anxieties over identity. Postcolonial biblical criticism, like other forms of “non-traditional” approaches, experiences these anxieties. As an approach billed as being argumentative, “where is the noise” would be an appropriate question to pose. To be clear at the outset, I acknowledge the vital shift that postcolonial biblical criticism has made in the field and the part that *Biblical Interpretation* as a journal has played by publishing some early groundbreaking articles such as Archie Lee’s on biblical interpretation in Hong Kong, a modern British colony, on the eve of its transfer to Chinese rule (Lee 1999). The greater attention to empire in the field of biblical studies (particularly those that predate the Roman Empire) as well as the cooptation and uses of the Bible and its related disciplines derive, in part, from the work of postcolonial biblical

criticism. Given that the reality of empire hardly remains static, both in its historical and current forms, the desire for something more from postcolonial biblical criticism satisfies not simply the need for novelty but also more importantly the question of relevance.

Relevance of biblical readings in the postcolony shapes the beginning and the goals of my concerns in this essay. I draw on Achille Mbembe's term "postcolony" to signify something beyond temporality, "but a number of relationships and configurations of events—often visible and perceptible sometimes diffuse" (Mbembe 2001: 14). As I use it here, postcolony comprises specific locations, states of being, experiences, and the general situation left in place in the wake of modern European imperialism. I use it as a cognate and synonym of postcoloniality, or what Gayatri Spivak describes as "the contemporary global condition" (Spivak 1999: 172). As far as postcolonial biblical criticism goes, the multiple and complex realities of postcoloniality require greater allegiance than the binding loyalty to disciplinary presuppositions. In this essay, I call attention to the preoccupation with history that drives postcolonial biblical studies. This reflex to history, often insufficiently checked and uncritically used, risks the continued production of postcolonial biblical work that serves abstractions rather than real human need. A turn away from history to foreground the reader/world in front of the text, while a useful ploy, does not completely solve the concern for relevance but, instead, contributes to a flat relationship between the many worlds and domains that interact in the course of reading. History as deployed in biblical studies tends to follow the perception that single events in discrete time periods constitute history; it ignores the actual realities of lived experience that operate more as "*infinite polycentricism*" (McLean 2012: 85) or, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo puts it in relation to the Caribbean, "[a] sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar" (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 11). The realities of the postcolony demand a different relationship with history, since the option to simply ignore history and revel thoughtlessly in the contemporary context seems futile. Given the complexities of the postcolony—formed, as they are through ancient and current power configurations—a deep dive into the present may also prove insufficient.

In this essay, I bring together several different pieces to think through what the postcolony means for biblical criticism. I state this simply as the task to postcolonialize the Bible, arguably the ultimate canonical text of the western imagination. The task as I see it lies in subjecting the Bible to the postcolonial optic, which Fernando Segovia initially defined as "a field of vision forged in the wake of imperialism and colonialism but still very much conscious of their continuing, even if transformed, power" (Segovia 1998: 51 n. 3). I draw the term

“postcolonialize” from Ato Quayson, who uses it in relation to the reading of western canonical texts, particularly Shakespeare. Quayson’s views on literature and interpreting texts from a liberative perspective (Quayson 2000: 157) have become common in liberation inflected biblical critique such as feminist/womanist, gender/sexuality, and race/ethnicity criticism. Essentially, I adopt the term “postcolonialize” to press the issue regarding the relevance of a text for the postcolony not simply as an abstract enterprise but a deeply engaged “cross-readings of ideas from literature to society and vice versa” (Quayson 2000: 183) with a view to tilting the balance towards the “now.” I use “now” with the freighted understanding that it is fragmentary and contradictory and with attention to, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, the “temporal heterogeneity of the ‘now’” (Chakrabarty 2000: 243). Although Quayson appears to privilege literature as the starting point for reading (Quayson 2003: xv), his pursuit of liberation to serve the interests of the postcolony commends the use of his term in this work. My main point here is to advocate for a deep connection between a “founding sense-event” and a “present sense-event” (McLean 2012: 1) with a postcolonial flavor. I am interested in the relationship that postcolonial biblical criticism establishes with history, of various sorts, in order to capture the complexities and contradictions of what it means to read the Bible in the postcolony.

The essay outlines elements that can constitute readings that postcolonialize the Bible. To set the stage for this, I first explore the path of postcolonial biblical criticism up to the present. The reliance upon history as a category for postcolonial biblical criticism forms the link to the next section, which explores how postcolonializing the Bible with the help of Derek Walcott comes to terms with history. Using the insights from Mbembe and Quayson, the third section argues for a broader conception of the postcolony than currently exists within postcolonial biblical studies. A final major section of the essay illustrates postcolonializing of the Bible through Walcott’s reading, primarily in *Omeros*, of Genesis 2–3.

The Path Taken

Since the first volume of biblical scholarship that was informed by postcolonial studies appeared in print in 1998 (Donaldson [ed.] 1998), a steady stream of contributions—edited volumes, monographs, journal articles—have nourished the intellectual field of biblical studies. These contributions cover questions as diverse as identity, migration, resistance, gender, occupation, and exile. The inaugural issue of *Biblical Interpretation* featured some of R. S. Sugirtharajah’s early thinking on Asian contextual readings of the Bible

(Sugirtharajah 1993); since then, postcolonial biblical scholarship appears regularly in the journal. Whatever the question or text that is being considered, history has been featured in some way in the postcolonial biblical studies that have appeared in *Biblical Interpretation* (e.g., Samuel 2002; Barrier 2008; Janzen 2016). Either through a recovery of an authentic imperial context of biblical texts to draw inferences and connections between those texts and contemporary colonialism or an account of how a biblical idea/text moved through its imperial development, postcolonial biblical critics rely upon history as a disciplinary category embedded within biblical studies. As Leo Perdue articulates, one of the tasks of postcolonial biblical criticism has been “the recapturing of tradition and the retelling of history. The replacement of the metanarratives of the imperialist countries requires the return to indigenous traditions and the retelling of national histories” (Perdue 2005: 287). In this regard, Perdue has contributed to the development of a historicized narrative of the Bible in the context of the series of ancient empires that colonized ancient Israel (Perdue and Carter 2015). Though in a different vein, Sugirtharajah has been quite adept at recovering the colonizing histories of the Bible and highlighting cases of indigenous interpretations of the Bible to counter a historical record of deficit and easy acceptance of the imperial text on the part of the colonized; this can be seen in his concern to highlight “the non-use of the Bible and ... the re-use of the Bible” in Asia (Sugirtharajah 1993: 55). Although Perdue and Sugirtharajah would articulate different views on the way that history plays a role in their postcolonial biblical work, they both reflect a shared dependence upon the discipline. These few examples illustrate a general trend: namely, the persistence of historicism within postcolonial biblical criticism.

The challenges of historicism surfaced quite early in postcolonial biblical criticism, alongside similar debates within the field of poststructuralism. Segovia, in a schematic evaluation that forms the basis of his call for a postcolonial optic, offers a strident critique of the centrality of the historical-critical methods to biblical studies. Noting these methods’ reliance upon Enlightenment virtues such as universalism, scientism, and positivism, Segovia draws attention to the need for “non-traditional” approaches such as postcolonial biblical criticism to be freed from such disciplinary shackles (Segovia 1995: 275–80). While Musa Dube represents an important voice in leaving behind the preoccupations with textual or biblical history for greater attention to readers of the Bible, she still uses histories of imperialism and their effects upon women to foreground her work (Dube 2000). Yet, whether the starting point is the ancient or contemporary world, history is often flattened into a singular event or moment to function as a correlate with contemporary contexts. Gregory Cuellar’s review of J. Severino Croatto’s rereading of Isaiah 47 serves as a more recent

example of the “eureka approach,” where historical imperialism as represented in the Bible authenticates and makes relevant contemporary reflection on empire. Since Croatto “recognizes a lived context of empire as the text’s primary point of reference,” Cuellar goes further to state, “[E]mpire in Isaiah operates no differently from colonial European empires” (Cuéllar 2015: 231, 225). The reduction of the distance between the ancient and the modern worlds is compounded by the stark flatness in his invocation of ancient world history: in most cases, specific political domain surfaces to constitute the past as an incontrovertible objective reality. Beginning with the contemporary world as a form of postcolonial biblical criticism also draws upon a notion of history that often identifies an event or a moment that exists in either heroic or degraded form and in some temporal relation to a colonizing event. The problem with such use of history comes from the myth of objectivity and certainty in the case of the ancient world and the circumscribed production of the postcolony as something “out of the pages of western thought” (Radhakrishnan 2000: 51).

The fascination with history leads postcolonial biblical criticism to privilege the deconstruction of the biblical text and the field of biblical studies as a sufficient task. Semiotic resistance serves up a superficial thrill that feels oppositional but provides little lasting benefit because, as Gerald West points out, postcolonial biblical criticism switched its focus “from actual struggles to theoretical redescriptions” (West 2009: 256). Or, as Jin Hee Han observes, resistance as a deconstructed notion can too easily be confused with protest (Han 2005: 8). Maintaining a noble purpose for the Bible as a postcolonial text occurs in part by overlooking the reality of the Bible as a canonical text that gained its status as one of the products of modern empire. Setting a biblical text solely in its ancient context to derive a form of oppositional stance that ancient Israel would have taken against various empires distracts from other embedded imperial histories. Additionally, valorizing the text as decidedly and uniformly resistant misses important realities of textual cultures, formations, and dissemination, both in the ancient world and in the world created through—and one that continues to be sustained by—western imperialism. To the extent that the Bible may be a foundational anti-imperial text, its real value for the postcolony lies not so much in our rediscovery of that past but more so in our self-reflexive capacity to use it to shed light upon and provide oppositional resources for current imperial configurations.

Admittedly, the category of history cannot be easily set aside in any postcolonial work (Abeysekara 2013: 506), let alone biblical criticism. The term “postcolonial,” with its gesture to temporality of a sort, introduces the contradictions and tensions in the discourse. In this regard, my claim here is not for an uncritical rejection of history or for further devaluation of postcolonial

biblical criticism. I am advocating for postcolonial biblical scholarship to push past the position where the postcolonial “often means dewesternization as thought by the White man” (Trinh 1991: 20) and push beyond the project “to ‘unthink Eurocentricism’ ... as a foundational aspiration of postcolonialist scholarship” (Lazarus 2011: 126). Instead, I suggest a *critical* turn regarding history in postcolonial biblical criticism to open up a more productive space to interrogate the various tasks of postcolonial biblical scholarship that are deeply contradictory—that is, oppositional to and yet complicit in imperial configurations—so we may give greater impetus to useful liberative work.

Overcoming History

As a western construct, history holds those colonized by European powers captive to narratives of origins and destiny. Walcott refers to history as “the Medusa of the New World” (Walcott 1974: 2) to introduce the monstrous problematic of those colonized by Europe in constructing a subjectivity that can compete with the temporalities established by Europe. History’s language of “old” and “new” not only validates colonial civilizations as “old” but also forces the colonized into the “new” category and thereby making them admit to not having a past or, if a past exists, acknowledging it as only a copy of an older civilization. Walcott bases his rejection of history upon the restrictive nature of the conception. He sees history as a language that confines memory to pain and, consequently, the attempt to avoid this pain through the production of an historical indigenous hero or civilization as a counter-discourse results always in failure, since what is produced has already been destroyed by the oppressor’s language (Walcott 1974: 4). The language of linearity, with its embedded idea of progress in history, means that the subjectivity of the colonized always begins much later in time; it only happens after that of the European, whose march to progress enables the colonized to gain a subjectivity. Essentially, history denies any existence to those colonized by Europe; it creates an obscene scramble on the part of the colonized to recover a noble past or to redeem past injuries in order to participate in the race called progress.

The Bible and, in particular, its primeval myths of creation provide the space where Walcott can problematize and respond to the challenges of history. Although he offers no definitive statement on history as it relates to the Bible, Walcott appears to think of creation narratives as ahistorical events that counter the “humanism of politics [that] replaces religion” (Walcott 1974: 7). Walcott’s use of the Bible is not simply confessional or even overtly, in the narrow sense of the term, religious. Instead, he sees religion as central to any

culture (Walcott 1974: 11); in his view, the abandonment or atrophying of religion by Europeans in preference for notions of progress forms an “absurd” argument for being the advanced culture. Walcott points to the absurdity that several European journeys to the “new world,” whether actual or fictional (such as Christopher Columbus or William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*), ended in shipwrecks and the ironic twist that the “advanced capacity” of Europeans at best grant them the expertise “to blow [them]sel[ves] up” (Walcott 1974: 6). Iconographic pictures of the meeting of the “old” and “new worlds,” with the “discoverer” setting foot on “virgin sand,” “these hieroglyphs of progress are,” as Walcott indicates, “basically comic” (Walcott 1974: 6).

The step away from the “rational madness of history” (Walcott 1974: 6) moves Walcott to the Bible, or, better put, to a specific biblical narrative. He turns to the primeval: the figure of Adam. This turn in Walcott is not a wallowing in some form of primal innocence that inveighs against the decadence of progress. In fact, he regards the idea of primal innocence, along with that of the noble savage, as constructions; both are European impositions that form part of their quest for purity. In returning to the primeval, Walcott moves away from constructed time and cultivates an Adam that differs from the biblical myth. Built upon “a political philosophy rooted in elation,” Walcott offers “belief in a second Adam, the recreation of the entire order” (Walcott 1974: 5). In the Adamic myth, Walcott revels in ahistorical time: a “pre-Adamic beginning, ... [a] pre-history” (Walcott 1974: 24). This is, however, not a dehistoricized time, since Walcott does not dismiss the critical events that have occurred. What ahistoricity offers and enables Walcott is resistance against the lure of humanism and other western constructs of time, progress, civilization, and development. He heightens his role as the poet to focus not on the certainties that derive from the positivism of anthropology, ruins, monuments, and other markers of history. Rather, Walcott replaces the usual signifiers of history with the nebulousness of the Caribbean Sea:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
In that gray vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.

WALCOTT 2014: 253

And yet in this poem, the sea contains the events that mark the reality of Caribbean existence and gives shape to what Walcott thinks of as history: faith, invention (Baugh 2006: 10), or memory of the tribe (Walcott 1974: 23; Theime

1999: 161). Edward Baugh sees Walcott's work as "going beyond history" (Baugh 2006: 9). This movement situates Walcott comfortably within the understanding of the Bible as literature, where the category history applies differently to that literary world. This suits Walcott since, for him, history becomes irrelevant to the Caribbean. According to Baugh, Walcott thinks so "not because [history] is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered" (Baugh 2006: 10).

Walcott serves as a useful place to think through the issues of history, primarily because he demonstrates what ahistoricity means for colonized people's interpretation of texts that have acquired canonical status. With a mixture of imagination, mystery, and amnesia, Walcott subjects texts to the glare of the reader-interpreter-(re)creator of those texts. Insisting that the "slave surrendered to amnesia ... is the true history of the New World" (Walcott 1974: 4), Walcott calls greater attention to the present as the entry point for engaging how the events of the past in their multiplicities—"not its historically explained simplicities" (Walcott 1974: 18)—generate new creations. Obviously, to categorize Walcott's view as revisionist history simply proves his point about the limitations of history. It is precisely the "new world's" capacity for renewal and generativity (Walcott 1974: 11) that leads Walcott to rely upon memory, imagination, mystery, and other elements rather than linear history and its data to interpret the present. His preference for "poetry as a form of historical instruction" (Walcott 1974: 22)—so his choice for a poet over a historian as the instructor—reflects the need to unearth aspects of Caribbean existence not captured in narrative history. Consequently, the myth of the Garden of Eden, with Adam as the primal human, serves as an evocation of deep human existence that forms a gathering point to situate the simultaneous origins of the "old" and "new worlds." Importantly, what he views as the ahistoricity of the biblical text enables Walcott to imagine the confluence of these civilizations in the Caribbean reality in order for the biblical myth to take on relevance or, as he maintains in his interactions with Homeric myths, "associations" (World Book Club 2017). His reading of Genesis captures the confluence of issues such as migration, slavery, indentured labor, exile, alienation, indigenization, and social formation that are unique to the Caribbean. Walcott's ahistoricity affords a way to postcolonialize the Bible.

Obviously, the structure of "old" and "new" at the heart of history also inheres in the Bible and in the discipline of biblical studies. The Bible in the postcolony hardly occupies a "pure" space; it participates in the problematics of history and consequently stands to replicate imperializing tendencies that the postcolonial attempts to undo. In fact, the tasks of interpreting as

well historicizing ancient texts to bring ancient communities to “life” need to be seen as imperial functions (Abeysekara 2013: 510). The extent to which these processes, texts, and interpreters are seen as complicit in imperial entanglements enables postcolonial biblical criticism to provide more useful oppositional work to empire in its various guises. One of the lures of history, as Chakrabarty indicates, produces the sense of history as an object that can be controlled and as an external object that the interpreter can claim not to have formed (Chakrabarty 2000: 244). This distance means that ideas such as social justice become simply that: ideas, abstractions, or a convenient “standing reserve” (Chakrabarty 2000: 246) detached from the present and is, therefore, of limited use to engage or address the pressing demands of postcoloniality.

Postcoloniality Unpacked

I now turn from the problematized view of history I outline above to a discussion of postcoloniality. The pressing issue remains finding ways out of the linearity—temporal and textual—that shapes how texts are read. Walcott’s attention to the problematics of history resonates with Mbembe’s exploration of the postcolony as an age as well as a political reality (Mbembe 2001: 15, 102). A suspicion and a distaste for linearity appear similarly in their works, particularly as they relate to the denial of the colonized’s subjectivity. For Walcott, the view of the enslaved African in the “new world” as “Adamic” dehistoricizes the colonized to the point where their origins no longer lie in the actions of European colonialism (Walcott 1974: 3). Mbembe holds a similar view and breaks through this trap with his assertion that “one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality” (Mbembe 2001: 15). Mbembe’s broadening of the conception of temporality illuminates even further Walcott’s emphasis on leaning not on a singular event or a bifurcation into “before” and “after.” Rather, Mbembe draws attention to a “multiplicity of times ... [covered by] not only the *longue durée*, but also in the indigenous *durées*” (Mbembe 2001: 16). Mbembe’s comprehensive descriptions of the postcolony, despite its limitations to the African experience, helps me point to what Ato Quayson refers to as the social from and for which the reading of texts takes place. Quayson sees literature and the social—not the same as society—as the starting points for reading (Quayson 2003: xv). He defines the social as “something to be *read for*” and “part of an anticipatory project” (Quayson 2003: xxxi). Quayson’s concerns with the reading of canonical texts to form what he regards as “local texts” serve important liberatory outcomes. Similar to analyses of history seen in Walcott and

Mbembe, he critiques New Historicism as a literary approach that produces an already formed outcome built upon the myth of objectivity (Quayson 2003: xxx). Quayson sees instead the need for intimate interactions between canonical texts and the social to expose how these texts shape contemporary life to contribute further to the pursuit of freedom (Quayson 2000: 157).

These three male thinkers, with apologies for this all-male cast, address the problematic of history for the postcolony. Although they handle history in different ways, their essential point proves useful for coming to terms with the legacies of history as a restricting concept in both postcolonial studies and biblical studies. They illustrate the insufficiency of history to treat the contradictions and heterogeneities that mark the postcolony. These contradictions do not simply reside at one moment that can therefore be easily contained through artful resolution or the triumph of the stronger term in the colonizer/colonized binary; rather, they persist across several temporalities and geographies—even within geographies—that require constant attention. Within biblical studies, the histories of ancient Israel, if they should be pluralized, are derived from the same methodological presuppositions upon which other histories of modern colonialism are built. The challenge that faces postcolonial biblical criticism lies in the hesitance to accept modern colonial history at face value while uncritically consuming histories of ancient Israel as the basis for oppositional discursive and other practices regarding modern colonialism. Even if this contradiction could be resolved, postcolonial biblical criticism has to acknowledge the reality of temporal heterogeneities as a critical component of its work.

The task to postcolonialize the Bible involves sustained engagements across temporal, literary, political, and social terrains. There may be more terrains worthy of consideration than I have named here, but these are the ones that I treat in some fashion in this work. The realities that mark the postcolony consist of constant interactions between, among, and across several terrains. Walcott looks at the contradictions involved in the ongoing “reconciliation” that takes place as a result of the “monumental groaning and soldering of the two great worlds” (Walcott 1974: 27). In Mbembe, this appears in his acknowledgement of “the multiplicities of time, trajectories, and rationalities” that move between the local and the global, the general and the specific, an African “historicity” and Western history (Mbembe 2001: 9). Quayson simply calls this work “calibrations”: namely, the task of fine-tuning “heterogeneous, multilayered, and interactive dimensions” within which the literary and the social interact in participation with the work of the interpreter (Quayson 2003: xvi). Instead of static events, moments, identities, issues that come together

in discrete containers to make meaning, the postcolony represents a site of multiple navigations—temporal as well as spatial—across various domains. To postcolonialize the Bible represents a step in coming to terms with what Benítez-Rojo refers to as a “syncretic artifact,” an outside product “consumed (‘read’) according to local codes” (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 21). More than simply contextualizing, postcolonializing the Bible taps into the various domains around literature and the social to generate meaning from an ancient text to speak to the liberative needs of Mbembe’s “indigenous *durées*.”

Postcoloniality in its fullness resists the tendency to harden its realities into neatly defined and explained issues. The layered forces of colonialism/imperialism merely shift their field of operation from one generation to the next, thus making the experiences of postcoloniality more of multiplicity rather than singularity. As Mbembe articulates the postcolony as an age, he lists constituent elements of “material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions” that are, in effect, “an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones (Mbembe 2001: 15, 16). The contesting claims inherent in the nomenclature “postcolonial” indicate the continuity rather than the cessation of imperial activity. Though useful to define the postcolonial, the term “legacy” invokes the singularity and linearity of a past event, whose resonance lingers in the present in ways that render the present powerless to its effects. In thinking through postcoloniality with the temporalities that Mbembe establishes, John McLeod’s metaphor of postcolonial reflection as a hinge—that is, a multidirectional analysis on a broad range of issues that include history, political resistance, modes of representation, among others (McLeod 2007: 7)—proves useful. More than reflection, as McLeod articulates, postcoloniality entails the life of experiences, in all their dimensions and temporalities, that flow from the lived and living state of uneven global power and control of resources—or, more simply put, of empire.

The textured understanding of postcoloniality proves useful for the task of postcolonializing the Bible. This perspective helps ground attention in the “now,” to use both Chakrabarty’s term and understanding. It also situates the Bible and its interpretation within multiple pasts and their continuities into the present and future. To postcolonialize means seeing the Bible not as a neutral product that mediates between competing domains but rather as a product of the conflictual realities that keep generating postcoloniality. As a reading strategy, Quayson’s move away from the society as a defining category for interpretation points in a useful direction. The switch to the social rests with the fact that once context, history, and so on are deduced, these seemingly objective data lead to the process of contextualization that he describes as

“a strategic act of selection [that] depends on the ideology, cultural background, and even idiosyncrasies of the reader” (Quayson 2003: xxix). His fear rests with the myth of objectivity inherent in this process rather than the threat of a hypersubjective reader, given the fact that other reading communities can replicate the process. Quayson gives the social a “not-yet” quality that builds out from actual society to include various influences that shape a society in known and unknown ways. Influenced in his thinking by Arjun Appadurai’s five dimensions of the “imagined worlds” that are shaped by global cultural and capital flows—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (Appadurai 2005: 33)—Quayson pays attention to not only the known forces but also their intangible influences. Although a useful idea, Quayson appears to limit the social to the world from which texts comes. I am more concerned to apply the notion of the social to the postcolony to generate attention to the various aesthetic and living domains that create postcoloniality, out of which and for which interpretation takes place.

In many regards, what I am doing here is recycling old wineskins along with old wine with the hope that the wine tastes like new. The ideas about history from Walcott and Mbembe or about interpretation from Quayson are not unique to them. I am proposing a path for postcolonial biblical critics to cut through the thicket of rejecting history, as framed by biblical studies, completely on one hand, or uncritically accepting it on the other. By distilling insights from scholars who have struggled with the implications of the discipline of history for the postcolonial and applying it to the interpretive task, I make the claim that this canonical text of Western imperialism—with its histories of imperialism and those the text continues to generate—becomes operationally useful for the postcolony when the multiplicities and contradictions that frame the postcolony are engaged. We need to attend to how the Bible has been used to engage—and we need to use the Bible attentively to engage—these contradictions and complexities of the postcolony, whether as a starting point, conversation partner, resource, or for the purpose of illuminating current options, unlocking visions that can only come from an ancient community’s struggle, or pointing to the enduring human condition and will to power. In whatever way that participation occurs, postcolonializing the Bible requires multiple engagements across several domains to generate liberative insights useful for knowledge, practice, and formation to confront postcoloniality. The concerns of the postcolony requires, therefore, that the interrogation of dominant ideas, values, and practices become central to the task of postcolonializing the Bible. Quayson expresses the urgency around reading for liberation à la Paulo Freire (Quayson 2000: 157), and makes liberation the defining purpose for postcolonial reading of canonical texts.

Postcolonializing Eden

I now demonstrate what I mean by postcolonializing the Bible through an analysis of Walcott's "narrative poem with novelistic features" (Baugh 2006: 185): *Omeros*. In this work, in part, Walcott offers a reading of the Eden narrative. Admittedly, Walcott's work here is a contrivance since it is not standard biblical studies output. However, the heuristic value of his interpretive moves may illustrate what it means to postcolonialize the Bible. I delineate the moves that Walcott makes that constitute postcolonializing the Bible. This is neither an exhaustive nor a methodological outline. Rather, my delineation shows some of the elements that make up the process.

To begin, let me clarify how I assess Walcott's approach to the Bible. The narrative, if not key images and motifs, of the Garden of Eden appears frequently in his poems, writings, and speaking. The compactness of poetry can easily hide his use of biblical material from plain view. Yet it is the deftness of the poet to craft new works out of several old cloths—one of them being the Bible. Critics pay greater attention to Walcott's ambivalent relationship with Homer and other European literary traditions as part of his struggle for an authentic Caribbean voice (Baugh 2006: 195). Less attention, though, has been paid to the place of the Bible as part of the broader colonial heritages in Walcott's work. To be sure, I do not think that Walcott sees the Bible as simply another element in the European literary canon; nor do I see his view of the Bible as some kind of necessary "alignment with faith" (D'Aguiar 2005: 217). Although not the doctrinaire Christian as his childhood friend Dunstan St. Omer (Handley 2007: 358), Walcott nonetheless apprehends transcendence and places the Bible in a critical role as a portal to the divine. As Handley reports, Walcott writes in "Caligula's Horses" of poets and how "their subject is not literature but God" (cited in Handley 2007: 103). Here "God" is not simply a set of theological propositions but an emblem of "chaos, ignorance"—and Handley adds, nature (Handley 2007: 103, 6).

First, Walcott engages the multiple temporalities of imperialism as well as those of the biblical text. As indicated earlier, Walcott adapts the figure of Adam to disrupt the notion of history. His evocation of the new world as "Adamic" serves as his protest and response to the claims that the Caribbean lacks history. Baugh indicates that Walcott chooses Adam to indicate "West Indian man could be Adamic, if he freed his mind of the baggage of history and the awe of history. Adam had no history, and all the world to name" (Baugh 2006: 9). The figure of Adam also allows Walcott to invoke the common heritage of all humanity and to make several claims about the simultaneity of all

peoples, including here those not only of Caribbean but also of African lineage. In *Omeros*, Walcott performs what he refers to as a poem “about associations not derivations” (World Book Club 2017). During a dream sequence in *Omeros* that takes place in Africa, Walcott celebrates African artisans as part of an elemental human instinct for creativity by invoking the figure of Adam:

Men are born makers, with that primal simplicity
in every maker since Adam. This is pre-history.

WALCOTT 1990: 150

Adam, therefore, no longer reads as a singular individual but the collective representation of human potentialities, which Walcott insists reside in Africans and Africans transported across the seas by referring to people of African descent in the Caribbean. By complexifying Adam's racial identity, Walcott undermines the move to think of Adam as a neutral figure who stands in for the racialized normativity of whiteness. The challenge here to the singularity of Adam confronts not only European myths but also a tendency within Genesis itself that limits Adam's descent to narrowly defined ethnic groups (cf. Genesis 5) to counter the more inclusive genealogical account (Gen. 4:17–22). While in his general writings, the evocation of Adam takes on generic qualities of the quintessential primal figure, Walcott's *Omeros* presents Adam as one of several primal figures in an arena populated no less by Homer's characters. Walcott's preoccupation with Homer shows in the names he chooses for the major St. Lucians in the work: Achille, Helen, Hector, and Philoctete. These Greek names for St. Lucians require no more explanation than the Anglicized version of Walcott's Germanic first name or the moniker of St. Lucia as the “Helen of the West.” Not only does Walcott forcefully represent the always already politicized nature of Homer as canonical literature, but he also, by associations, performs a similar feat for Adam and the biblical traditions.

Second, Walcott confronts and exposes the biblical text's embeddedness in multiple imperial traditions in ways that deny postcolonial subjectivity. Arguably, Philoctete functions as the closest analog to Adam in *Omeros*. Walcott's glaring distortion of Homer through the deliberate misspelling of the names Achille and Philoctete emphasizes his point that the work is “not a translation of Homer [since] a lot ... that happen in the poem are incorrect in Homeric terms” (World Book Club 2017). A minor character in the *Illiad*, Philoctetes becomes the Caribbean postcoloniality in Walcott's Philoctete. Beset by a nagging wound that he attributes to an ancestor, Philoctete's trans-generational wound owes its origin to the Atlantic slave trade. More remarkable

than assigning this wound to the brutality of the slave trade is the reasoning that its origins explain its incurability:

He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles
of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?
That the cross he carried was not only the anchor's

but that of his race.

WALCOTT 1990: 19

Philoctete functions somewhat like the reverse of Adam, as he displays more vividly the wound of a primordial ancestor; he is at the same time like Adam, since his wound becomes the original from which others spring, as in the case of Hector (Walcott 1990: 40). Although the motif of the wound draws more upon Homer than Genesis, Walcott calls attention to the easily overlooked detail of the extraction of the rib from Adam and the possibility of a wound or even a scar at the site of extraction. He recreates this moment narrated in Gen. 2:21 through his recollection of intimacy with a lover and how the sweetness of that gendered pairing resulted in a wound:

her forehead glaze with the sweat

of the bride-sleep that soothed Adam in paradise,
before it gaped into a wound, like Philoctete.

WALCOTT 1990: 42

The subtle identification of Philoctete with Adam feels like an intrusion in the romantic reverie of this scene. This sequence follows the violent encounter between Helen and Achille and the rescue of Helen by Hector. Although not part of the complicated love triangle that Walcott threads through the work, Philoctete's unwelcome presence at this point highlights the pervasiveness of the postcolonial wound and its capacity to distort various aspects of life: occupation, social interactions, romance, and so on. Implicated in the drama of Helen, Achille, and Hector are issues of masculinity in general, the sexual performativity of the tourism industry, economic development, and other conditions that result from colonialism. While Philoctete performs the Adamic role, his wound, it is important to note, is not natural but generated by the machinations of European colonialism.

Third, Walcott foregrounds postcoloniality, not as a single static issue but as multiple forms of alienation in search of a cure. He makes the most vivid

association between Caribbean postcoloniality and the Garden of Eden narrative in the healing sequence where Ma Kilman, the devout Catholic shopkeeper, conjures the medicinal herbs and rituals for Philoctete's healing. Ma Kilman represents the contradictions and heterogeneities of Caribbean spirituality because her discomfort in the required church wear shows how ill-fitting orthodox Catholicity—or Christianity, for that matter—is in the Caribbean. No sooner is Ma Kilman adjusting her superfluous stockings that she wears in the sweltering heat to the coolness of the Church interior that both her mind and worship go to Philoctete's wound. Through several crossovers between the Genesis text and African herbal medicine and spirituality, Walcott uses Ma Kilman's discovery of what is needed for Philoctete's cure to support his claim of African religiosity's capacity to invigorate Christianity. The identity of the medicinal flower that Ma Kilman's grandmother used (Walcott 1990: 19) comes to her through "her own litany" of several different types of vegetation. Included in the list are:

Hail Mary marigolds that stiffen
their aureoles in the heights ...

the thorns of logwood,
called the tree of life.

WALCOTT 1990: 236

In both of these elements Walcott destabilizes traditional Christian orthodoxy, first through his sexualization of Mary and, then, the decentering of the tree of life as presented in Gen. 2:9 or even 3:22, where it is seen to host the capacity for longevity. Rather than assigning the healing or life-giving properties to a single tree, Walcott takes the tree that the Bible assigns primacy through the protective actions of the deity at the end of Genesis 3 and makes it one among many other types of trees that are useful for healing. Can a single tree really contain such properties? Walcott goes further to adjust the woman's observation about the tree of the knowledge of good and bad—"it was good for food" (Gen. 3:6)—by making it a descriptor about a single element in the long list of vegetation: "the aloe good for seizures" (Walcott 1990: 236). The recreated garden in the Caribbean conforms to a different logic about flora, one that is based upon healing and not death; in the process, it invigorates value in the Caribbean landscape.

Whether or not Walcott assigns a single deity as the source of creation, the task of healing the wound of slavery and colonialism requires multiple deities. Ma Kilman's ministrations draw upon her ancestral spirituality that she

faintly recalls but nonetheless lies deeply within her collective consciousness. In *Omeros*, deities that include “Erzuile, Shango, and Ogun” descend upon “the cavernd prophetess” (Walcott 1990: 242–43)—the villagers see her “as a *gardeuse*, Sybil, obeah-woman” (Walcott 1990: 58)—to perform a ritual bath upon Philoctete in “one of those cauldrons from the old sugar-mill” (Walcott 1990: 246). The obvious reference to the plantation economy that generates the wound in the first place raises the complex question regarding the role of European colonialism in healing the postcolonial wound. Ma Kilman proceeds to wash Philoctete not simply at the site of the wound but rather his entire body. The bath washes away myriad ailments to cure numerous conditions, as shown in the renewed strength of Philoctete’s limbs. While later in the book Philoctete will regain ambulatory strength, this scene represents not only a cure or even rebirth of a single person but also the re/creation of Philoctete’s tribe in the broad sense of that term. Walcott draws together the biblical motifs to render Ma Kilman a re/creator out of water rather than out of the ground. Although Walcott inserts a creative force here, he does not displace God from the process; instead, Walcott situates the disappointed and angry postlapsarian God (cf. Gen. 3:14–24) in his narration of the events as if to indicate the inefficiency of Christian orthodoxy to attend to this wound and to proclaim the necessity of the Caribbean religiosity for a renewed Christianity:

That was why the sea stank from the frothing urine
of surf, and fish-guts reeked from the government shed,

and why God pissed on the village for months of rain.
But now, quite clearly the tears trickled down his face
like rainwater down a cracked carafe from Choiseul,

as he stood like a boy in his bath with the first clay’s
innocent prick! So she threw Adam a towel.
And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day.

WALCOTT 1990: 248

Ma Kilman brings forth what Walcott refers to in other places as the “Second Adam” (Walcott 1974: 5), a reference that finds no mention in this scene. Here Walcott engages the woundedness of postcoloniality and its incurability not simply as moments within history, but rather as challenges that stand both outside of and within temporal dimensions. The temporal, geographical, and racial manipulations of the Eden narrative press home claims as varied as salvation, reparations, development, and personal healing—all concerns of postcoloniality.

Fourth, Walcott examines how interpretations of the biblical text help facilitate practices of dominant groups over time. In Walcott's works, the figure of the biblical Adam appears in greater complexity. With little patience for the presentation of Edenic innocence that has contorted much Christian interpretation of the narrative, Walcott focuses instead on Adam more as motif and symbol and less as character. The notion of primeval innocence appears in the reflection of retired British expatriate soldier, Major Plunkett, and his wife Maud about the beauty of St. Lucia:

“It’s so still. It’s like Adam and Eve all over,”
Maud whispered. “Before the snake. Without all the sin.”

WALCOTT 1990: 63

Walcott's insistence of the African being transported to the Caribbean as Adamic cannot accommodate primal innocence because he does not revel in the type of European nostalgia that sets out to prove the purity of the colonized. In his reading of Genesis, Walcott is closer to the text than traditional orthodoxy permits, since the ideas that frame Christian notions of original sin are absent from the text. His reading of Adam as flawed reaches a new note when applied to the African transported to the Caribbean and joined to the numerous narratives—literary, religious, political, economic—of the Europeans: the transported African becomes badly injured and is in need of recreation. In his use of Adam, Walcott avoids “the fallen Adam” and focuses instead upon “the renewed Adam.” Orthodox biblical interpretation may regard the expulsion of Adam from the Garden as a sad plight, and his children at war with each other as evidence of a fall. This sense of a primeval fall may be equated with the historical events of European colonialism, but Walcott demonstrates how the African's transportation to the Caribbean actually renews the old tradition and the old religion through Adam's recreation in the healing of Philoctete. His reading of the biblical narrative refuses to linger on the myth of lost perfection, such is a privilege unavailable to the postcolonial.

Fifth, Walcott demonstrates the struggle and capacity of postcoloniality to re/create the “old” traditions. The presence and work of Ma Kilman, who represents the religious renewal that Walcott prefers as the Caribbean religious narrative, provide a different interpretive possibility. Ma Kilman as re/creator performs an important function as she speaks and brings about what may be possible for some of the most vulnerable in her midst. The notice that sums up her creation of the sauce at the Christmas feast echoes notes of divine creation in Genesis 1:

as Ma Kilman sipped her sauce from the ladling wood
and pronounced, "It good," to both the one who was blind
and the healed one.

WALCOTT 1990: 273

Walcott's preference for Adam over Eve seems striking and may betray a masculinist bias. In the figure of Ma Kilman, however, he finds a feminized creative force that combines with African divinities to read and postcolonialize the biblical myth of creation. Just as he seldom reads the biblical text in isolation from other European canonical texts, Walcott ensures that his reading of Genesis not only takes those other canons into account but also acknowledges the expansive spirit world that shapes the Caribbean reader. In his poem "Crusoe's Journal"—a strong hint to the Robinsonesque genre of the colonial era and their application to certain Caribbean islands (DeLoughrey 2007: 12)—Walcott admits that the poet must read these pieces together and, in the process, produce something different:

out of such timbers
came our first book, our profane Genesis
whose Adam speaks that prose
which, blessing some sea-rock, startles itself
with poetry's surprise, ...

WALCOTT 2014: 75

The task of postcolonializing European canonical literature involves more than simply contextualizing texts. In Walcott's multivalent term, "our profane Genesis," lies the challenge to make, in his words, associations with these texts so these texts can become new creations, new Caribbean possessions. Not surprisingly, for Walcott, the island of St. Lucia is the Edenic geography of Genesis. Given modern tourism's cooptation of the long-held fascinations with finding and experiencing the Garden of Eden, St. Lucia as the setting for the Garden narrative is no more profane than the medieval insistence on geographically locating the Garden at the top of the world. Walcott enters into political, economic, and social critiques of the tourism industry in St. Lucia, lifting up several issues of postcoloniality through the biblical motif of paradise as it appears in tourism discourse (Strachan 2002; Merrill 2009; Salazar 2010). He points to the sense of entitlement, which is evident in the various motivations for Major Plunkett and Maud's decision to retire to St. Lucia. For instance, Maud's long suffering as a military wife comes with the reward of a place in paradise: "She deserved Eden after this war" (Walcott 1990: 28). Descriptors recreate the "innocence" of the Mediterranean and make the location deserving, such as:

sunlit islands,
where what they call history could not happen.

WALCOTT 1990: 28

How St. Lucia becomes that place requires no explanation, but in these descriptors lie the transference of European exotic fantasies from the previously considered location of the Garden in the broader Mediterranean world to the tropics of the Caribbean (Sheller 2003: 109). In addition, the expectation of islands as sites of renewal, self-discovery, and personal growth lay at the heart of both Maud's and Major Plunkett's quest to deal with their life, whether it is their childlessness or the Major's quest to write his epic tome. After all, the tourism pitch positions the islands as places to cure the existential crises of metropolitan living. Peeling back the layers of the lives of St. Lucians as well as those of the tourists reveals a different reality.

Sixth, Walcott then explores a specific issue of postcoloniality—tourism—from multiple and conflicting textual and other domains. The gender, sexual, and economic issues that follow modern tourism in tropical areas complicate the notion of these locations as paradise. Since Walcott layers Homer with Genesis, his cast of characters take on different roles, as they should in his retelling. Maud, described as “an adamant Eve” (Walcott 1990: 90), adds another dimension to the complex competition for Helen's affections as she contends with Major Plunkett's attraction to Helen. As both woman and island—“the island's beauty was in her looks” (Walcott 1990: 96)—Helen's enthralling beauty is enhanced by a bracelet that “coiled like a snake” (Walcott 1990: 96), and she functions to derail the Major as the snake in the Genesis narrative. Walcott obviously reads the snake in Genesis as a troubling but not evil presence. Rather than the lure of the snake as in Genesis, Helen, with all the complexities of that name, is positioned by Walcott as the potential specter that would haunt the European expatriates and the broader European colonial project:

You can pervert God's grace and adapt His [*sic*] blessing

to your advantage and dare His [*sic*] indignation
at a second Eden with its golden apple,
henceforth her shadow will glide on every mirror

in this house.

WALCOTT 1990: 96

Rather than making this moment of whether to act on his attractions to Helen a time of moral decision making for Major Plunkett, Walcott frames it within

the European craving for the islands that had already been enacted. Major Plunkett's actions would potentially expose him to the "original error / in the lust you deny" (Walcott 1990: 97). Helen's role here is not the Eve of sexual fantasies; rather, she is "Judith from a different people, / whose long arm is a sword" (Walcott 1990: 97). The turn to the biblical Judith, whose sexual and military prowess provide a modicum of redress for her people's conquest by a foreign power, places in view the larger issues concerning the various exploitations of the Caribbean—people and land—that persist in a new form through tourism. Walcott refuses to ennoble any altruistic motives by shutting down Major Plunkett's protest about the purity of his intentions regarding Helen. In a turn back to the Genesis narrative, the bracelet *cum* snake—or better, the snake *cum* bracelet—cynically but insightfully retorts to a version of the civilizing mission given by Major Plunkett ("to help her people, ignorant and poor"): "But these, smiled the bracelet, are the vows of empire" (Walcott 1990: 97). Walcott applies notion of the fall in his reading of Genesis here to point to the corruption of the will to empire. *Omeros* highlights the tourism industry's use of discourses of paradise and, by doing so, shows its failure. No halcyon scenes of an idyllic Eden can appear because the biblical narratives of Eden themselves participate in the creation of real life stories of conquest, capture and enslavement, exploitation, and unequal economic structures of tourism (Murray 2009: 22; Sheller 2003: 122).

The tourism marketing of St. Lucia as paradise raises questions of ecological protection as much as the role of the inhabitants in the biblical narrative revolves around serving nature (Gen. 2:4–8, 15). Preferring to see Walcott's "Adamic" more as a lower case "adamic" to separate Walcott's evocation of Adam from "its historic use to enable and justify environmental exploitation," Handley observes that Walcott struggles to come to term with human culture's relationship with nature (Handley 2007: 4). In claiming the African in the new world as "Adamic," Walcott uses the descriptor "elemental" to point to people "inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past" (Walcott 1974: 2). This "elemental" character results in attention to the presence of the earth and the immediacy of one's relationship with it in order to support life. The threat posed by tourism to sever relationship with the earth appears real in *Omeros*. Whether this challenge occurs in the form of Hector's abandonment of fishing to become a taxi driver in the tourist industry—which Walcott (1990: 231) presents as infidelity ("Castries had been his common-law wife") and as disrespect for a mother ("A man who cursed the sea had cursed his own mother")—or through Walcott's own outward musing about how development on the island endangers the loss of innocence as "the afterglow of an empire" (Walcott 1990: 227), an unmistakable alienation from nature occurs. The risk posed by the

intrusion of marinas, hotels, locations worthy of postcards, and other constructions upon the natural environment are as ominous as any that makes the craft of the poet artificial. As concrete construction replaces greenery and, in turn, displaces carpenters, Walcott eerily depicts the outmoded work of the poet:

as wood grew obsolete
and plasterers smoothed the blank page of white concrete.

WALCOTT 1990: 227

The fact that Walcott enters the debate about tourism development in St. Lucia through *Omeros* suggests that his poem is no abstract reflection but an engagement of the economic realities of a Caribbean island underdeveloped by colonialism and facing a new turn of economic exploitation from metropolitan countries.

Paradise and links to the Eden narrative complexify the debate around tourism in *Omeros*. Walcott raises the question to himself as to whether an insistence on no-tourism-development as a means to maintain a pristine landscape is a selfish motive: “Hadn’t I made their poverty my paradise?” (Walcott 1990: 228). Here Walcott introduces how susceptible he can be to the idea of the Caribbean as eternally primal, in ways similar to notions of the Garden as being in a fixed state of perfection. Despite the curses in Gen. 3:14–19, the sense that Eden remains untouched by these new realities—particularly as they relate to animals, vegetation, and the ground—appears in interpretations of the passage. Walcott’s possessive, “my paradise,” echoes ideas of the still intact Eden that animates colonial era explorers, some of whom are convinced that they discovered it in the tropical islands of the Americas with their unique flora and fauna as well as exotically different peoples (Strachan 2002: 23). Walcott does not remain too long in this state, given his impatience with nostalgia as well as the fact that, whether from the perspective of the tourist or native, paradise in tourism discourse is an invention. Nevertheless, Walcott gestures to the way the Genesis narrative is used in tourism’s artificial constructions. The malleability of Eden as a trope in tourism discourse means that whatever unique claims St. Lucia anticipates are easily undercut by other tropical locations using the same narrative construction that revels in fake souvenirs rather than unique experiences. Walcott raises the irony that the Caribbean interest in equating its pristine environment with the Garden ends up destroying the environment and its uniqueness. He does so in the context of the debate to construct an airport named Hewanorra, the Carib name for what is now St. Lucia:

until too much happiness was shadowed with guilt
 like any Eden, and they sighed at the sign:
 HEWANNORRA (Iounalao), the gold sea

flat as a credit-card, extending its line
 to a beach that now looked just like everywhere else,
 Greece or Hawaii. Now the goddamn souvenir.

WALCOTT 1990: 229

Though Walcott questions here the fiction of Eden, he also calls attention to the Genesis narrative not as a story with a happy ending but one that results in the original inhabitants losing their place in the land. With European adventurers in search of Eden and the role the narrative played in the economic exploitation of the Caribbean during plantation slavery, colonizing interests see in Eden a happy story. Tourism, then, becomes the next source of economic gain at the hands of historic colonial powers, which discovered a new source to fuel their thirst for gold (Sheller 2003: 163; Strachan 2002: 9). Walcott's work touches on and hence brings out the crass economic realities of modern-day tourism that continue the exploitative relationship with Edenic spaces.

Conclusion

The elements I explored here in Walcott's work can contribute to a more formal methodology of how the temporal heterogeneities of postcoloniality assist in postcolonializing the Bible. Walcott does not simply read Genesis as a blank slate and, indeed, it never existed as such. Instead, he provides an avenue to move away from simply offering comments on biblical texts. Postcolonial biblical criticism has never really articulated a methodology outside of the official canons of biblical scholarship. Consequently, postcolonial biblical work has become a flavor within other forms of biblical scholarship, easily recognizable in form and structure but only with a different taste. Postcoloniality, however, is more than a different taste; it is a unique set of experiences that exists over several temporalities that testify to the demands of what it means to exist within structures of unequal global power. No single time captures this experience and no single experience of postcoloniality is contained within discrete historical periods. Efforts to reflect postcoloniality as a living phenomenon by reading biblical literature, therefore, should reflect the fullness and contradictions of the experience. By problematizing history, facing the demands of the western European literary canon, acknowledging the hurts of Caribbean

slavery and colonialism, taking the Bible seriously (as literature, book of faith, source of myths, and source for “the language of God” [D’Aguiar 2005: 217]), grounding his reflection in the realities of modern-day tourism in St. Lucia in neocolonial economic environment, and much more, Walcott pulls together elements of what it means to postcolonialize the Bible.

To postcolonialize means more than simply contextualizing. The task to postcolonialize the Bible involves moving beyond contextualization’s focus on static and single moments in the past or in the present to engage a broader view of the multiple temporalities that shape postcoloniality. To postcolonialize the Bible involves constructing meaning that is both relevant to broad pursuit of liberatory purposes and in response to postcoloniality. Walcott provides the example of this through the Garden of Eden narrative, which would not have been seen as a typical postcolonial text since it makes few references to empire. The participation of the Edenic narrative in European colonial discourse notwithstanding, its presence within the current narratives of tourism makes it a critical point of conversation if one is to deal with current realities of postcoloniality. Given the Bible’s role in supporting empire throughout history, connection points with postcoloniality are not difficult to find. The more pressing task would be to generate meanings out of the living realities of postcoloniality that prove useful.

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Erasures and *Dysplacements*: The “Belly-Myther” of Endor and Biblical Studies from Canada in Light of the TRC¹

Fiona C. Black

I don't believe in cultural appropriation. In my opinion, anyone, anywhere, should be encouraged to imagine other peoples, other cultures, other identities. I'd go so far as to say that there should even be an award for doing so—the Appropriation Prize for best book by an author who writes about people who aren't even remotely like her or him.

NIEDZVIECKI 2017



Beginning, and Beginning Again

These days, I sense a certain malaise amongst some of my colleagues; it manifests in the form of some rather foundational questions that they seem to be asking. What is the purpose of biblical studies? Why do we persist with it? Is there a more appropriate way to proceed? I admit to my share of doubts, too, especially those in the classroom, where the urgency of the question, “so what?” seems ever present, and growing. For many, these questions are borne from an increasing frustration with what they might perceive as the parochialism of the field, its limited audiences, or, most often, the gulf between global affairs and the way we have traditionally studied the Bible. It may seem a negative beginning, but I suppose the first thing to ask in a publication that addresses the discipline's future is: should there be one?

Assuming the answer to that question is yes—for now—I want here to start a conversation. Following a particular trajectory in the field, which has affiliations with contextual, postcolonial, and minority biblical criticisms, this essay seeks to explore what it might mean to realign biblical studies from the perspective of a particular context—Canada—and in light of the recent Truth

1 I am grateful to Deborah Wills, Leslie Shumka, Andrew Wilson, and Erin Runions for their generous and perceptive comments on this essay.

and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report of 2015. Though I locate the conversation here, I do not think this a “Canadian problem” with a Canadian solution. It is rather a concern for all disciplinary biblical studies that is the progeny of Eurocentric, colonial criticism (which hereafter I will refer to as “mainstream biblical studies”).² Why do this? Surely commentary on what is contemporary and what is in the future of biblical studies cannot but begin from a contextualized position.³ The question of how to decolonize our work and learning spaces in response to the TRC is something that is actively transpiring now in my work place and my home (via my children’s education), so it is very much a part of my own intellectual context.⁴ But more than this, as the TRC reveals, given the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) and other abuses of indigenous peoples and their rights, it is something that ethically needs to be addressed by all Eurocentric disciplinary fields, including and perhaps especially biblical studies.

I begin by engaging two bodies of work: several recent publications on the state of the field and some existing explorations of decolonization and indigenous contexts in the discipline. After these moves to contextualize, I venture a non-indigenous⁵ reading of a particular text: 1 Samuel 28, the story of the spirit-medium/witch of Endor. I have chosen this text for its muddled colonial picture, its somatic impulses, its pedagogical implications, and its oral tracings. Reading in dialogue with others, particularly those who have worked on this text using indigenous or minoritized perspectives (Donaldson 2005; Havea 2011, 2016), my work on this text will allow me to float an experimental reading strategy that aims to make space for indigenous readers.

2 For ease of discussion, I refer to “the discipline” of biblical studies in order to indicate its common beginnings, but I am well aware that, today, biblical studies isn’t a “thing,” any more that any other discipline has a homogeneous identity. I am hopeful that my work here can be useful to all corners of our field, despite our differences.

3 Segovia and Tolbert’s edited collections (1995a, 1995b), readers will recall, have had a profound influence on the shape of the field.

4 I have already made a start on thinking about the discipline in Canada, commenting on, among other things, the need to connect biblical studies with indigenous communities; see Black 2012.

5 It should be stated that I do not claim this as an indigenous reading, since I am not part of, or connected to, indigenous communities. It is rather framed as a reading that might originate from “mainstream biblical studies” as a test case for opening up space for dialogue. This is not a step I undertake lightly: even interpretive strategies with the interests I express should be formulated in dialogue. As I said, however, here I mean to begin a conversation, not delineate a future.

My operating question is this: might we read a text that appears to be a cog in the colonial wheel as a more fluid space for thinking with or about indigenous subjects and alternative ways of reading? I am not so much interested in *how* we settle the text of 1 Samuel 28 as the settling itself. In other words, it is the matter of approach that I am looking at here, not the problems presented by a single, troublesome text. I propose to do this through exposing such techniques as erasure and *dysplacement* in the story. I am curious about erasures, about the parts that get left out or smeared over in difficult texts, and in the adjustments we make as part of our disciplinary practice. The beginning epigraph speaks to one kind of erasure from the field of literary studies.⁶ It raises the important question about who should speak, for whom, and when—and about where the line lies between being in alliance/solidarity and appropriation/being paternalistic. In our own field, a related kind of erasure might be the omission of non-Western, non-white voices from “mainstream biblical studies,” a gap which recent work has tried to address.⁷ A third erasure might be the subtle, or not so subtle quieting of the body and its workings as it impacts interpretation. Recent interest in the sensate body and affect are important new foci, which are significant especially for the possibilities that they open up for reading differently, and in concert with marginalized voices. Erasure of subjects and their bodies has, in this Hebrew Bible story of a land for the taking, resulted in their removal or alienation from the

6 This was apparently an off-the-cuff attempt in a special issue of *Write*, a publication of the Writer's Union of Canada, devoted to indigenous writers, to suppress the voices of those who have so long been excluded, ironically at precisely a moment of their inclusion. In an interview with *The Current's* Anna Maria Tremonti on CBC, Nziedviecki explains (rather weakly, it appears) that his intention was the following: “Indigenous writers having experienced cultural genocide, having been raised in a dominant culture that represses their own, are doing amazing and exciting works reclaiming their own voices and re-imagining their own unique culture. And this involves for them, to some extent, writing from a perspective that unfortunately and cruelly is not fully their own—or they feel isn't always fully their own. And so that was the connection I was trying to make between acts of imagining other people's ideas and perspectives and Indigenous writing today” (Tremonti 2017).

The response on social media, however, was not at all this way inclined, but exploded with enthusiastic offers to fund such a prize, along with denigrations of political correctness. Nziedviecki resigned his position as editor soon after.

7 See for instance (among many other examples) Segovia 2000; Dube (ed.) 2001; Boer and Segovia (eds.) 2012; Havea (ed.) 2017. There still remains the question of how integrated such voices are in various aspects of the field, however, and how central “their” concerns are to become in the field. I think the erasure of these voices also has implications for the texts we chose to study, and how we study them.

land. *Dysplacement* is the state of being present, but at ill ease, in the land. 1 Samuel 28 is fundamentally a story about who belongs and how they belong; but it is also that: *a story*. Can we tell it another way?

State(s) of the Field

Some recent state-of-the-field publications offer intriguing comments about methodology, reception, and the identification of “appropriate” voices for the field. In general, these publications reflect perceptible methodological and ideological movement in the field, and, for most of us, positive change.⁸ The publications also, however, reveal patterns that still seem to be very much in play around how we do biblical studies in the present. The works also highlight some issues that may, despite their age, have some traction for future thinking.

In the 1980s, we seem to have been pinning our future hopes on method. Two collections from mid-decade enthusiastically proffer a kind of method-first idealism, but they also are quick to identify perceived risks. Douglas Knight and Gene Tucker’s edited volume (1985) offers a catalogue of methodological approaches and aims to incorporate the diverse roles that the Bible has played in North American culture into the work. Richard Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson’s edited volume (1987) provides an opportunity for the younger generation to have a venue for thinking about method in a serious way. But it is the associated risks for both projects that particularly are worthy of attention. Friedman and Williamson address the urgent question of how to *liberate* biblical studies from its inheritance of “two millennia of *knowledge and emotion*,” (Friedman and Williamson 1987: viii, emphasis added); but while optimism is appropriate, their contributors indicate that change is not so quick to follow.⁹ For Knight and Tucker, cautions are necessary, lest readers assume that all change is evolutionary, that “later scholarship is always more advanced,

8 Contrast, for example, Jo-Ann Hackett’s lone voice in Friedman and Williamson (ed.) 1987 with the approximately 30% representation of women scholars in Boer and Segovia (eds.) 2012. One cannot pretend that gender representation issues are fixed now, to be sure, but there is important growth in numerous directions, inclusivity and theoretical framing among them. For some, though, the changes are glacial; and biblical studies still seems unable to adopt the kinds of theoretical framings and applications that are needed. See, for example, Moore and Sherwood 2011. See also some conversations about the changing nature of the discipline, and the push for more interdisciplinary/reception historical work (e.g., Lyons 2010; Crossley 2012).

9 Jo-Ann Hackett, for instance, laments the fact that her inclusion of social history is likely to make the piece remain on the margins of biblical historicism. Heartbreakingly, she offers the

more refined, or more resilient than earlier work.” “The historian of research,” they continue to admonish, “is all too familiar with the excesses, the extremist positions, the ideological oddities, the reactionary postures, and the partisan movements.” (Knight and Tucker 1985: xiii). Methodology is thus framed by these two collections as a liberating force from emotional, overly-vested interpretation, but yet in need of containment against its extreme implication—excess, partisanship, reactionism—those features which might disrupt any kind of methodological decorum.

This kind of policing is something that Roland Boer and Fernando Segovia address, some 20 years later (2012). For them, any redress must account for economic crises, geopolitical shifts, and other frames which have surely impacted the project of disciplinary self-reflection. In their words:

Voices from the majority of the globe have begun and continue to speak in ways that are reshaping biblical studies, relativizing the absolute claims that have been made and continue to be made by some of the discipline's practitioners. In the process, it has also become clear that biblical criticism does not have an agreed upon past. It has multiple pasts, depending as much upon your conversation partner as his or her provenance. The futures that spring from these pasts are equally multiple.

BOER AND SEGOVIA 2012: XVI

Boer and Segovia's solution to the potential problems of reflecting such multiplicity is to seek contributors' comments on geographies, not on methodologies. This enlivening shift yields much richness, but the essays included as a whole do not bring method into conversation with those geographies in a consistent or applied way.¹⁰ This focused theoretical question is an important next step, I believe: how do particularized, global contexts impact the way a given method is constructed and employed? Further, while the diversity of this collection is much needed, one should not fail to notice its own homogeneities—for instance, its predominantly Christian interests.¹¹

comfort that such a study might benefit at least those who are looking for pastoral resources, but is unlikely to “make much of an impact” in the general field (1987: 161).

10 This is true of my own article about biblical studies in Canada (Black 2012). Though I trace the “Delitschzian” beginnings of Canadian biblical studies, I have yet to connect method more fully to the types of readings that predominate in Canada (e.g., historical, text-critical).

11 This was pointed out to me by a colleague with whom I shared my own article on Psalm 137 (Black 2012); she was lamenting the silence of Jewish voices in the collection.

It is with some initial hopefulness that one might read that Stanley Porter and Matthew Malcolm's edited volume (2013) seeks to address "responsible plurality" in hermeneutics. But contrary to what we might expect (especially given Boer and Segovia's collection), they define plurality in this way:

Some parts of the Bible, by their very genre, invite a plurality of interpretations (such as poetry or apocalyptic), while some parts resist it. But even the most open of texts cannot be *infinitely* open, or they would have no reason to exist. So how can readers of the Bible appropriately acknowledge and do justice to plurality, while being responsible readers?

PORTER AND MALCOLM 2013: X

Anthony Thiselton (the honoree of the volume) expands on similar ideas in his own essay, and his contrasting perspective shows in a rather neat way the ambiguities of our nomenclature ("plural," "global") and perhaps, the perils of the discipline's methodological desires.

[I]t may be encouraging to reflect what hermeneutics might not be. It is encouraging to see, for example, that the brief incursion of *Semeia* and other works into structuralism and poststructuralism seems to have drained the subject almost dry.... I also wonder how seriously postcolonial and liberation hermeneutics will still run given that they almost always use the same familiar texts for their own purposes.... But I am still doubtful whether a sufficient number of biblical scholars see that the Bible concerns engagement with the Other, and does not constitute primarily a mirror in which the wishes and desires of the self are bounced back, clothed with pseudo-divine authority.

THISELTON 2013: 25

So, if we were tempted to think that more rigorous attention to method *qua* method could be liberating (Friedman and Williamson [eds.] 1987), Thiselton argues for restraint: only that which serves "responsible hermeneutics" is a legitimate methodological avenue. But what—and this is a question for all of us—is responsible hermeneutics? For Thistleton, it appears to be that which is true to text and Other, but one assumes he means the God-Other, not the marginalized other, and so responsibility takes on a particularist cast that will always serve the disciplinary, colonial status quo. The other tantalizing possibility in and amongst these collections is of a more open, or dare I say, unstable, text. Porter and Malcolm indicate as much (2013), but they leave readers

wondering what might happen if this were to be pushed to a more extreme extent and the expectations and caveats usually placed on textual limits were challenged.

There is also the related matter regarding the role that the Bible plays in culture (Knight and Tucker [eds.] 1985).¹² The explosion of work that has been going on in the areas that I shall, for convenience, call reception history,¹³ is testimony to the perceived importance of expanding the conversation about the interpretive multiplicity of biblical texts. But for me, the true significance of reception historical work in the mainstream is not that it interestingly details a plurality of perspectives, or even that it might (should?) trouble the idea of a single, original text. Instead, it is that it destabilizes textuality and meaning. Reception history ought to have profound implications for questions of biblical authority, for the construction of culture, and for interpretation. This is the place to push the boundaries of criticism, by letting what has been done affect (for the better) what comes next. To return to the matter of erasures and appropriation prizes (see epigraph), while acknowledging interpretive plurality can be used as a useful political tool, careful travel must be made with considerations of who might be heard and how what is perceived to be the centre is policed. Conversely, patience and humility, especially in terms of an openness to “oddities, postures and movements,” are warranted.

In sum, these collections raise questions about our own past and how we perceive our own contexts and the “ill-fitting” voices therein. I detailed some of these suggestions from collections past, because I want to bring the ideas of reception, excess, the emotive and the ethical into conversation with each other as I look towards the future. How to proceed? To start, one might find such opportunity in Thiselton’s disparagement of certain methods (liberationist or postmodern) and their proponents, who unimaginatively—he thinks—use them in order to *see themselves* in the text. The kind of plurality that Boer and Segovia’s collection advocates is exactly attuned to seeing oneself via cultural and political contextualization. Moreover, beyond such self-contextualization, there is the opportunity for the critical examination of one’s

12 Back in 1985, could Knight and Tucker have been anticipating what we would get in the habit of calling biblical *cultural studies*, almost 20 years later (e.g., Moore [ed.] 1998; Exum and Moore [eds.] 1998; Black [ed.] 2006); or what we are today jockeying to define and delimit—reception history?

13 There is some debate over how best to call the recent interest in reception of the Bible. Is it *Rezeptionsgeschichte*? Reception history? Reception criticism? Cultural history of the Bible? Or just, biblical studies? For a quick survey, one could compare Knight 2010, Beal 2011, Lyons 2010, and Klancher 2013.

past and its impacts on the present. Further, the above aligning of interested or emotional readers with the *wrong* way of interpretation potentially offers a promising solution. Often, in order to overturn traditional and oppressive interpretive framings, one might invite certain types of dissent—or rupture—into the interpretive conversation. To invoke Friedman and Williamson (1987: viii), it might be engagement with emotion, or the openness to various forms of knowledge. To apply a counter pressure to Knight and Tucker's reassurances, it seems that it is precisely the "excesses, the extremist positions, the ideological oddities, the reactionary postures, and the partisan movements" that the discipline ought to consider, because it is in including, not erasing, these that we might actually hear the subaltern speak.¹⁴ Some of those excesses are visible in somatic and emotive cues, and so it might be in pursuing a self-reflective, interested, emotional interpretive schema (following the *wrong* way, in other words) that we find ourselves on the way to responsible reading.

What is the TRC? Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Canada and Beyond

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission describes itself as "a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement," with the mandate to:

inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools (IRS). The Commission will document the truth of survivors, families, communities and anyone personally affected by the IRS experience. This includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis former Indian Residential School students, their families, communities, the Churches, former school employees, Government and other Canadians.

WWW.TRC.CA

The IRS were started in the mid 1800s as a joint venture of the Canadian government and various religious organizations to provide an English education to indigenous children,¹⁵ especially to give training in the areas of farm work

14 That is, if one is interested in the subaltern. I fail to see how any talk of pluralism or responsibility could avoid opportunities to bring all voices into the conversation. If, *pace* Thistleton, the divine Other appears to be suggesting otherwise, then perhaps this is not the divine Other (for us); see Bailey 2005.

15 Though settlers to Canada had, in various guises, attempted to provide education to the peoples they encountered from as early as the mid 1600s, much of this moral and

and machinery.¹⁶ The less spoken rationale was to “take the Indian out of the child,” through the interrelated tools of settler culture, religion, and pedagogy, which were deemed ideal for such purposes.¹⁷ In 2015, the TRC released a multi-volume report, detailing—through frank representation, survivor accounts, and institutional and legal documentation—the enforced attendance of children; suppression of their language and culture; physical and sexual abuse, trauma, and death of many of the residents. Appropriately, the term cultural genocide is used of the IRS and their effects.¹⁸

The TRC’s report includes a list of 94 recommendations for education, health care, child welfare, legal equality, and more. Steps towards reconciliation are also adumbrated, such as the adoption of the United Nations’ Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the making of a covenant of reconciliation, and creating legal rights and privileges for indigenous peoples as equal parties under the constitution.¹⁹ Several of the TRC’s recommendations are specifically directed at the churches involved in the IRS. In particular, the report calls

religious, and some in the form of boarding schools, the government sponsored system of IRS began in earnest in the mid-1800s, following the Ryerson report (1847), which established two schools in Ontario. These were subsequently deemed a failure. The Davin Report (1879), created after study of the American industrial residential school system and curriculum, advocated the creation of similar institutions in Canada in working partnership with various Christian denominations. These schools had more traction. In 1920, via an amendment to the Indian Act, attendance at residential schools became mandatory. The last IRS was closed in 1996.

- 16 This is the description of the Ryerson Experiment:

[The school’s] purpose should be to ‘give a plain English education adapted to the working farmer and mechanic’ and in addition ‘agriculture, kitchen-gardening and mechanics so far as mechanics is connected with the making and repairing the most useful agricultural implements’. To attain their objective, it would be necessary for the students to reside together, with adequate provision being made for their domestic and religious education. Dr. Ryerson especially deemed the latter essential. “With him (the Indian) nothing can be done to improve and elevate his character and condition without the aid of religious feeling’. For this reason, he insisted that the animating and controlling spirit of each Industrial School ‘should be a joint effort of the Government and of the religious organization concerned.”

INDIAN AFFAIRS 1965: 13–14

- 17 The phrase is attributed to Sir John A. MacDonald, the architect of the Indian Act (1876).
 18 The term is used in the TRC document, but has been controversial; see some of the debate in Woolford and Benvenuto (eds.) 2015, and the editors’ introduction (Woolford and Benvenuto 2015).
 19 The Executive Summary of the many volumes (534 pages) can be found here: <http://nctr.ca/reports.php> or here: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>.

The list of the 94 recommendations is also accessible through www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

for a formal apology by the Pope,²⁰ and requires church leaders and leaders of other faiths,

in collaboration with Indigenous spiritual leaders, Survivors, schools of theology, seminaries, and other religious training centres, to develop and teach curriculum for all student clergy, and all clergy and staff who work in Aboriginal communities, on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, the history and legacy of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system, the history and legacy of religious conflict in Aboriginal families and communities, and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA 2015: §60

Finally, it also calls for “religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius*” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: §49).

Where, then, is the Bible implicated in this history and, indeed, in any reparation that might be made? In the TRC’s invocation of the preparation and role of future church leaders, it is surely there, but implicitly, in the way that the Bible informs theological discourse and pedagogy. In the executive report generally, however, or the Calls to Action specifically, no fingers have been pointed at the text itself. Is this an oversight, or has the TRC missed the significant roles that these complex texts play in informing and promoting colonial process via religious institutional mechanisms (unless this is inferred from the “concepts used to justify European sovereignty” mentioned above)? More significantly, to my knowledge little or no comment has been made on the TRC’s work in the context of our discipline, either here in Canada, or amongst our colleagues in North America or Europe.²¹ As I have already indicated, the reach of

20 Most of the churches, or parts thereof, have offered apologies for their part in the creation of the schools, for the cultural genocide that they occasioned, the repression of native spiritual traditions, and for the physical and sexual abuse that took place there. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: Summary, appendix 4. In June of 2017, Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, had an audience with Pope Francis and requested he visit Canada and offer the long-awaited apology.

21 A distinction is usefully made between the kind of reparative Christian projects, exemplified for example by Hodgson and Kothare 1991 or McKay and Silman 1995, which make use of biblical material to support theological engagement within the community, and the literary, cultural, or historical analyses of biblical texts with, for example, postcolonial or gender analysis at their heart. It is clearly important that work of both types should be

colonial impact goes much further than this specific geographical or cultural context. In point of fact, there is not much that is consequential that separates Canadian and American biblical scholars—nor European or Australian scholars—where the colonial ownership and interpretation of the Bible is concerned. In addition, an almost identical system of IRS predates Canada's in the United States, though it would seem that Canadian lawmakers applied pedagogical insights of the American system with particular energy and alacrity (Niezen 2000: 271). To my knowledge, however, no corresponding commission or recommendations have been made in the United States.

What, then, might be meant by doing biblical studies as a *response to*, or *in light of*, the TRC? Two related, but disparate concepts must be teased out here: response and reconciliation. The former might indicate efforts to promote practical or material change, some of which are elaborated in the *Calls to Action*.²² The idea of reconciliation, however, requires much greater formulation and analysis. Writing before the TRC report appeared, Sean Coulthard, among others, has already drawn our attention to the problematic nature of the politics of reconciliation and the fact that any forthcoming models (e.g., the TRC report) should not be received uncritically.²³ The Canadian model is based, Coulthard argues, on colonial ideas of recognition, which are rhetorical tools in neocolonial policies that do not actually effect real change in indigenous communities (Coulthard 2014: 25–49). As he points out, reconciliation is largely engineered to effect a consistent equilibrium, where the past can be acknowledged, apologized for, and dispensed with—so that the status quo continues. Indigenous *ressentiment* (angry refusal to get over the past) or response to these reconciliation politics is just and appropriate (Coulthard 2014: 112–15, 126). It is based on resentment and anger; these natural responses must be allowed to stand in the face of continued political rhetoric and societal

undertaken, and be allowed to cross-fertilize where appropriate. But what needs guarding against is the assumption that future response to the TRC is solely to be the project of communities of faith in dialogue with indigenous peoples. Or, to put this more baldly: it is not a problem of the church that should be fixed (only) by the church.

22 For example: pedagogical change, consciousness raising, and incorporation of indigenous voices and learning methods in institutional/post-secondary education, and the creation of social networks and supports for indigenous communities.

23 There has been a lot of response to the TRC, much of it critical. Indigenous voices note the silence of the government, post-report, commenting that the telling of survivor stories with no real response or action has only opened up old wounds. Failure to act meaningfully on land rights and missing and murdered women and girls has compounded this loss. The academic community also offers a variety of critiques, anticipatory and reflective. See, for example, James 2012; Storrie 2015; and Niezen 2016.

abuses of indigenous peoples. So, an essential question for “mainstream biblical studies” would be towards what does it see itself working? Is it “reconciliation”? And on whose terms?

The omission of the Bible from the TRC’s recommendations signals the potential for openness and possibility. For biblical studies and its future, I see need for close, analytical work with the biblical text that would target the nature of its colonial legacy in Canada and the United States, and specifically in the context of the IRS system. These, for example, would be questions for future study. How might one untangle and understand the Bible’s role in the social and political discourses of settler Canada in the 1850s and beyond? How were biblical texts used as part of the IRS curriculum? In Canada, how did they support mandatory attendance after 1920 and the programmatic “civilizing” of the “Indian”? What role do they play in survivor stories as collected by the TRC?

This present paper cannot, unfortunately, provide a sustained study of biblical texts and IRS contexts and curricula. That is a task for the future. There is other important work to be done as well, however, in the order of laying some useful methodological and ideational groundwork for what we might come one day to call “responsible interpretation” of the Bible. I offer that this, too, can be part of the work of “reconciliation.” Here, I am interested in such questions as: what might be useful methodological tools for reading the Bible in ways that practice openness or readiness for dialogue with indigenous communities? How might the conquest narratives and the expurgation of indigenous religious identities in favour of monotheism in the Hebrew Bible be reasonably addressed? How might we respond to the TRC’s call to “repudiate [biblical?] concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples”? Further, what should the role of our disciplinary history be in our future work? As scholars of a text whose history of reception has had such devastating effects (in so many contexts), it behooves us to make critical reception work an integral part of biblical scholarship. This moves us beyond the doing of reception history because of what is interesting to doing it for what is ethically necessary.

While work on such questions might be embryonic in my own Canadian context, and specifically with regards to the TRC and IRS, biblical scholars elsewhere have engaged with indigenous experience and communities in limited,²⁴ but extremely useful ways. Robert Allen Warrior’s influential article, “Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians,” which first appeared in 1989, has functioned as a kind of consciousness raising (e.g., Bailey 2005; Runions 2008). Warrior called for attention to be paid to indigenous histories and experience,

24 “Limited” is a reflection on quantity, not quality.

questioning the scope and suitability of an indigenous theology of liberation that might be based on texts such as the Exodus story, which is itself followed by a problematic conquest of Canaan's indigenous peoples (Warrior 2005). In response to suggestions that Warrior might just find an alternative model to the problematic conquest narrative—for instance, that of the daughters of Zelophehad (Weaver 2005)²⁵—Warrior responds that it is not a matter of finding the right story (Exodus or conquest—or NT clarification), as some have challenged, but to acknowledge the right of certain subjects to exist and to allow their experience to challenge the underlying assumptions of the stories and their resulting theologies of liberation.²⁶

The matter of how to read stories is therefore key. Laura Donaldson argues that reading is a form of cultural contact, not unlike the colonial encounter between European settlers and American Indians (Donaldson 1998). She reads the tale of Jesus walking on water alongside Thomas King's retelling of it in *Green Grass, Running Water*. In King's story, Old Woman calms the storm via a song; Young Man (Jesus) is not able to acknowledge her ability and success, and so the dispute over who has been successful at controlling the storm is brought to the fore. In answer to the conundrum, Boat and Waves bear witness to Old Woman's role in the story. In this form of re-telling, then, Donaldson sees a model for relational reading that not only depicts the central players but also acknowledges other, essential voices in the (back)story. Following King's example, she argues for a model of polycentric multiculturalism in reading and pedagogy that recognizes the contribution of elder wisdom and social critique as forms of alternative knowledge (Donaldson 1998: 101). In this way, reading becomes "an interwoven and unevenly constituted web of textual, readerly, social, economic, symbolic and historical strands in relation—or as Old Woman might say, *in all their relations*" (Donaldson 1998: 94, emphasis added).

Donaldson's intertextual reading allows for the possibility to defamiliarize and decolonize the text, creating opportunities for (unappreciated) indigenous subjects to have a role in the story. While it is important to locate readerly strategies that destabilize in this way, Roland Boer cautions, in response to Mark Brett's work (Brett 2008), that it would not be enough for indigenous-allied readings to re-interpret the troubling texts in the Bible as if they are merely misunderstood versions of their true originals

25 Compare McKinlay 2013 and a response to her work in Horsley 2013.

26 This is in the form of a reply to the responses on that article by Jace Weaver (2005) and William Baldrige (2005). The three (responses and reply) are printed together with the Warrior article in Treat (ed.) 2005.

(Boer 2010: 428).²⁷ Indeed, pessimistically, one could ask if there could ever be “reconciliation” when stories of conquest remain stories of conquest (cf. Warrior 2005; Boer 2012). Donaldson is clearly going a step beyond this keep-or-reject-the-text binary, however, and implying a third way. I infer that poly-centric multiculturalism asks readers to engage with another option, which would be to listen for and incorporate other relations (literary, and I propose, methodological), even those barely visible, or imagined. She allows for the possibility that they may haunt the story, always insisting on a hearing. Indeed, this is exactly what the medium of Endor becomes for Donaldson in a subsequent reading (Donaldson 2005), a predecessor of other biblically-haunted figures, such as the demon-possessed girl and the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–30; Matt. 18:18, 23–27). In other words, Donaldson’s “all my relations” of her earlier article (Donaldson 1998) becomes more than inter-text; it becomes inter-cosmic, opening up room for many other relations, even those she has not yet anticipated, such as inter-species, inter-sensate, inter- and intra-corporeal, and more.

Surely, then, what might also be explored is not just how we read, but also how we *tell* stories, especially when telling interactively constitutes the teller and the listener in an endless process of relation.²⁸ This should not be surprising, given the oral storytelling nascent in the biblical material and, we infer, the cultures described therein, such as that of the indigenous woman of Endor in 1 Samuel 28. Althea Spencer Miller’s work on orality in Jamaica is useful here for its theoretical framing: she elaborates that it is important that the discipline recognize the methodological distinctiveness and power of oral traditions and the oral cultural subject (Spencer Miller 2013). If orality can be understood as a condition of interpretation, one can bring out its resonances, and embrace, for instance, its “cultural elements such as embodiment, opticality, aurality, tactility, vocality, and tacit cultural codes as interrelated and necessary

27 Brett’s book is a sustained non-indigenous reading of a number of biblical texts, the purpose of which is to reduce dependency on the colonial order (Brett 2008: 1) by interrogating the texts that promote such dependency in theological, political, and economic thinking. (This is very much in line with the TRC’s mandate to challenge the discourses that laid claim, and continue to do so, to indigenous lands.) Among other things, the work analyzes the biblical content of legal and political documents of colonialism, helps to elucidate biblical support for such political doctrines as *terra nullius*, and also investigates central themes, such as ancestor worship, genocide, and prophecy.

28 See, for instance, the work of Madipoane Masenya on Sotho stories, which she uses to augment/challenge her readings of Ruth and Esther (Masenya 2001, 2013). This work complicates not only the biblical tales, but also how we come to think about them, and about ourselves as readers. The stories, biblical and Sotho, appear to constitute each other.

accessories in holistic communication” (Spencer Miller 2013: 47).²⁹ Similarly, in arguing for a *Talanoa* reading of 1 Samuel 28, Jione Havea brings the threads of orality, the political, and anti-colonial together (Havea 2016). *Talanoa*, which is “story, telling, [and] conversation” (Havea 2016: 81) is fronted as an oral-cultural medium that can be used to explore various threads or stories evident or implied in texts. His own *talanoa* reading of 1 Samuel 28, therefore, explores and (*re*)tells the story of Saul and the medium of Endor, casting the light this way and that, so as to reveal permutations and shades not yet considered. Importantly, in working this way, Havea finds a means of critiquing the imperial logic and its latent nationalism that appear to govern the scene.

Readers (and storytellers) such as Donaldson Spencer Miller, and Havea also open up space for the democratization of the field through the inclusion of other, non-specialized voices. In this light, Boer’s observation that “we still await the rise of a number of Aboriginal scholars of international standard” (Boer 2012: 231) in Australia signals, no doubt unwittingly, a backward perspective in terms of the future of “mainstream biblical studies.”³⁰ It seems to me that the discipline itself might have to change radically to accommodate new voices. In order to listen to the (perceived) “ideological oddities, the reactionary postures, and the partisan movements” that Knight and Tucker mentioned in 1985, it would have to be open, specifically, to other ways of knowing.³¹ These include other stories, but also other ways of telling them, even non-verbal ones (Spencer Miller 2013; West 2007). Of course, one final but important caveat must be mentioned. As Boer notes, “[W]hen speaking of Aboriginal religion [in Australia] we must never forget that the main form of such religion is Christianity, transformed and reshaped in distinct ways, and this means that

29 Funlola Olojede also urges that the recognition and exploration of the common impulse of storytelling, shared by Hebrew Bible narratives and many African cultures can both be a legitimate means of complementing or understanding Hebrew Bible narratives and an essential component of scholarship and pedagogy. Her work is part of a broader scale African project with other scholars (Olojede 2014: 8); see www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/religious_studies/SBL2008/Bosman.doc.

30 I know that Boer would recoil at seeing his work represented as mainstream. My point is that the demand that conventionally trained Ph.D.-s in biblical studies probably will not be a useful or just direction for the future (cf. Crossley 2012).

31 For example, this means following the lead of indigenous scholars of the Bible, such as Warrior or Donaldson; creating alliances with different kinds of reading communities (cf. West 2007; Brett 2008); or listening and engaging with different ways of telling stories (Havea 2016; Donaldson 2003, 2005; Spencer Miller 2013). It also means that “mainstream biblical studies” must become adept at the kind of self-reflection, preparation, and transformation that will enable it to step aside.

the Bible is a crucial feature of Aboriginal religion” (Boer 2012: 230–31). It goes without saying that this proposal risks the assumption that all indigenous communities would be receptive to dialogue about the decolonization of the Bible in the ways I am indicating here: this cannot be taken for granted.

In the reading that follows, then, I am looking to test whether there might be a viable way forward to create openings in mainstream readings of the text. This builds on the methodological space created, for example, by Spencer Miller’s oral modality, by Havea’s *talanoa*, and by Donaldson’s “all our relations” readings, but pushes them further to explore more of the excessive, off-limit spaces that some of the chroniclers of the discipline eschewed in the past: namely, the partisan positions, ideological oddities, reactionary postures, and self-interests. As a way of framing a foundation on which to build another story, I will look at textual and readerly erasure in varied forms. The question of what has been pushed out is not only about roads not taken and suppressed voices, but also about somatic impulses, quietened presences (ghostly or otherwise), and affective responses, including fear and *solistalgia*. In their place, I am also interested in what rises up, both from the grave and from memory. These represent alternate forms of knowing which might be explored for how they story—or *otherstory*—the conquest narrative and encourage readings that can be transformational for the reader (cf. Donaldson 1998; Vaka’uta 2014;) and the text.³²

Which Witch? Belly-Mything and the Spirit Medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28)³³

It is usually understood that the colonization of the land of Canaan is not neatly wrapped up by the end of Judges, and that much of the work of consolidation, settlement, and political stability takes place in 1 and 2 Samuel. This being the case, the story of the unnamed medium of Endor is easily read as

32 Nasili Vaka’uta’s reading of the Rahab story (2014) from the perspective of indigenous women of Tonga explores just such transformational practices—*of the reader*—through various boundary crossings in the areas of methodology, ideology, and his own gender identity. He also intimates that, having thus read the text, neither reader nor text would remain unscathed.

33 What’s in a name? These frequently appear: witch, ghostwife, necromancer, spiritist or belly-myther. The latter is something I will take up below, but its proponents (Greer and Mitchell 2007) chose it for their volume specifically because of the connotations that modern readers bring to the subject of witches (superstitions, hokus pokus, and so on). I use medium because of its more general application.

a strategic, imperialist embellishment of Saul's military and leadership failings, which are presented in conjunction with David's meteoric rise over the diminishing King. Here in this scene, for instance, one finds evidence of the truly pathetic nature of Saul, who, getting no response from Yahweh through acceptable channels such as dreams or *urim*, desperately pursues illicit ones to consult the recently departed, Samuel. Everything in this scene might be seen to speak to his pathetic nature, including his fear at the closeness of the Philistine army (28:5), his shameful (Jobling 1998: 186) sneaking off in disguise (28:8), and his abject despair at Samuel's grim pronouncement (28:20). It is interesting, however, to look at this scene not only for what it might (or might not) tell us about Saul, but for what it indicates about the woman of Endor and Saul's interaction with her. This is, I suggest, not only an encounter between a failing monarch and a medium, but it also offers a disruptive—and underappreciated—commentary about the colonial work that the Deuteronomistic project presents.

One of the Deuteronomistic strategies for colonizing a people is the destruction of their intellectual property (Bailey 2005: 22–23). This may well be the backdrop of the story here. From the outset, it is immediately observable that four types of knowledge are displayed and played off against each other in this chapter: Yahweh's (which is withheld from Saul); Saul's (which is lacking, unable to be increased); Samuel's (which is representative of Yahweh's and in consistent relationship with Saul), and the medium's (which has ostensibly been erased). Which will dominate? It is also apparent that the manipulation and suppression of knowledge and its sources are intricately wrapped up with all kinds of inversions and erasures that take place in this scene. These include Saul's and the woman's affective responses, Saul's suppression of his bodily appetites, and some interesting dynamics around meeting (the ghost) and eating. There are also the expected marginalizations of the woman in terms of her gender, indigeneity, and profession. These dynamics here work for the colonial project, yet potentially against it.³⁴

It is tempting to see Saul's troubles as stemming most directly from an earlier error, which has, at least according to Samuel, caused him to lose Yahweh's endorsement; the Chronicler vociferously agrees (1 Chron. 10:13). In 1 Samuel 15,

34 Similar work has already been done with Rahab, a roughly comparable indigenous figure (Crowell 2013), also multiply marginalized, at risk of having no agency (Davidson 2013), who appears to be shown to collude with the colonizer (Bailey 2005), but who has been read as exemplifying humour as a way to unmask the colonizer's disgust at the indigene (Runions 2008) or as offering a position of power in her ability to disrupt (Vaka'uta 2014).

Yahweh has ordered the Amalekites and all of their possessions exterminated. Saul, however, does not follow instructions. Instead, he chooses to spare “Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed” (15:9). Ostensibly, Saul applies his knowledge and experience as a colonizer of lands, a *settler*. He spares the animals because they are useful—“the best of ...”; “all that was valuable” (15:9). His actions are in direct contrast to Yahweh’s wishes, and Saul’s weak excuses (15:15, 24) only serve to show his misunderstanding of Yahweh’s line in the sand, both in terms of his own status and the future of the nations. The scene also shows that Yahweh’s perspective on the settlement of the land is as much ideological as it is material. If Saul was not simply prevaricating, but was prescient about the useful sacrificability of the animals in question, Yahweh’s planned extermination of all of the Amalekites and their livestock (future sacrifices to their gods) makes a certain sense: they might indicate a blotting out of their cultural and religious futures as well as their lives.

In its shocking display of Saul’s inability to have the right knowledge, the scene at Endor may well be a parody of his pre-existing status as “prophet” (Michael 2014). The beginnings of this purported prophetic failure, moreover, have already been made apparent. For example, in 1 Samuel 14, just prior to the fateful decision about the Amalekites, Saul takes on what some perceive to be unnecessary acts of piety in order to promote success in battle. (It is noteworthy that the battle is one that his son begins without his consent.) This goes wrong, and subsequent efforts to repair the situation are met with further failures. So Saul seems to have failed connections repeatedly with the battlefield and the cult of Yahweh, two arenas in which he should, by now, be expert. Others, instead, supply information or appropriate courses of action for him. Saul in all his relationships, then—with enemies, priests, men, and family—seems already to be going awry; the refrain of the people that Saul “do what seems good to you” (14:36, 39) seems ironic. Saul cannot make good choices because he does not have knowledge. When he gets to Endor, we witness the culmination of his ignorance.

Why might the dead need to be consulted for knowledge, when the signs of Saul’s future are evident from the living? It is not just the case that Samuel might have answers for Saul, but that the medium of Endor is in the (apparently thriving) business of facilitating the movement of knowledge between the present and the beyond. As the passage makes clear, such spirit workers or necromancers had earlier been suppressed and expelled from the land by Saul himself (28:3), and for good reason (Lev. 19:31; 20:6; 21:27; Deut. 18:10–11). And yet, they are still very much part of the land. Despite the prohibition, it

seems that the tacit understanding of the textual world is that this means of acquiring knowledge is not only important but also essential to the living. It seems plausible that the Israelites who had entered the land might have availed themselves of such services when other, more legitimate means of acquiring knowledge had failed them (Arnold 2004: 200–203). When Saul asks for a necromancer, one is easily found (1 Sam. 28:7)—though to reach her requires a significant detour (see below). So, according to this story, the ancestors possess a particular window onto the future that others, Saul especially, might not have.

In the confrontation with Samuel, it is difficult to determine what exactly becomes known. Samuel seems to confirm Saul's worst fears, but Samuel is not able to offer him advice on what he *should do* (the reason for his inquiry; 28:15). Indeed, the only person who is able to suggest a specific course of action is the medium, who—after she has brought up Samuel—offers, first, an assertion of reciprocity, and, then, a most practical but unexpected suggestion: Saul must eat. The scene does not suggest the all-time failure of prophetic/Yahwistic knowledge, but it does bring these two knowledge systems together into the same pericope and in some ways pits them against each other (Michael 2014). It also deftly shows the ability of suppressed indigenous traditions and practices to provide successful access to other forms of knowledge.

The more interesting part of this scene, perhaps, is not *that* the medium facilitates knowledge, but what sort of knowledge she facilitates and *how* she does so. She is described as אִשָּׁת בְּעֵלָת אֲבִי and אִשָּׁת אֲבִי, or a woman of spirits (28:7),³⁵ but what this means is far from clear. Donaldson urges our recognition of evidence of the shamanic in the medium's characterization; she infers from the scene that, as an indigenous person engaging with the ancestors, she has a shamanic role (Donaldson 2005: 105). However, the typical signs of shamanic practice are not immediately evident.³⁶ We logically recognize spirit work or necromancy, but note the paradox that her craft is to bring those who do not exist into the present, where she still exists, despite prohibitions that she should not. Is her profession then a cipher for her foreignness (Jobling 1998: 186), her indigeneity? A first step that might be taken in our reading is to affirm

35 See discussion in McCarter 1980: 418, 420 and Greer and Mitchell 2007: xi–xvi.

36 Jobling disagrees. He sees an absence of the “ballyhoo we associate with spiritualism” at first, but then decides the medium resorts to it in her description of Samuel, who is rising from the grave. He wonders if this “professional technique” is used here because she knew Saul was Saul all along, and contrivance was needed to protect herself. See Jobling 1998: 187.

the right of this expunged shamanic subject to exist (cf. Warrior 2005; Havea 2011: 256–57; Jobling 1998: 189).³⁷

And then we might note what she does. We see several actions in the story, but most of the actual signs of her craft have been erased. We are left with four things: the woman's accessible inaccessibility, her fear, her ability to know/recognize Samuel and Saul, and her provision of a meal to care for Saul. Typically, commentators have addressed these various details as evidence, respectively, of the woman's foreignness and precariousness, Samuel's (and by extension, Saul's) status, and her kindness or hospitality. Taken together, however, they rather indicate a person—and a scene—that is deeply imbricated in indigenous knowledge, mediated through a relation with the land, as well as the workings of the body and the senses. I wonder if these might be significant means of complicating the colonial story.

In the Greek translation, the medium is ἐγγαστρίμυθος, the meaning of which Greer and Mitchell determine to be “belly-myther.” The term might also have the meaning of ventriloquism or speaking in the belly (Greer and Mitchell 2007: xiii–xiv). For early interpreters, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, the voices coming from within are not those of the ancestors, but of demons who are vestiges of pagan practices (Greer and Mitchell 2007: xiv–xvii). These demons intervene in the life of Saul and attempt to subvert Samuel (Greer and Mitchell 2007: xi–xvi). They also trouble the real, consequential questions of what happens to the body after death, and what exactly is Samuel's location (hell?) and status. But from the belly also, I suggest, comes the belly-myther's cry: “When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice” (28: 12). And so, in this visceral roar I first see the response from the gut that is born of her recognition of the ancestor and what that recognition means for the woman's future. It is a recognition not just of laws and enforcement, but of life and death—literally, her own, and that which threatens it, the dead-but-alive figure of Samuel. Is her cry therefore a cry of fear?

Fear, of course, is to be expected in this scene; we perhaps miss its significance. Saul encounters Samuel (a ghost!), who confirms the accuracy of Saul's own fear for his life. The medium realizes that, as a person outside the law, she is extremely vulnerable and so we surmise that she, too, would likely be afraid: she has even tested the unknown Saul over her safety as she embarks on his

37 This may seem an obvious thing to advocate. Jobling comments that it is odd that the text does not disparage the woman (1989: 189), but I see a subtle disparagement in his own characterization of the woman's craft (“ballyhoo”), the kind that Donaldson sees in more stringent critiques, such as Eugene Petersen's, which characterizes this work as “new age” (Donaldson 2005: 109).

cause (28:9). This is supposed to be an unsettling scene for us too, but our gaze is fixed on the tragic hero slipping towards his ignominious end. In the dark, Saul has snuck over enemy lines; he has been in disguise; he has had an illegal spirit worker call up a ghost; he has collapsed in fear. As Havea notes, Saul “has to swim in a sea of fear” (Havea 2016: 84). Fear in this scene signals the unstable, the sign of that which is not in the domain of the powerful. Fear belongs to the subjugated, those who are about to be brought down. Moreover, the fear in the scene dominates, almost becoming another presence. Saul brings it with him to Endor like some kind of malaise; it clouds the scene, his judgment, and it seems to infect the medium.³⁸

Or does it? Unlike Saul, she is not paralyzed by fear, if we read more closely her questions about why Saul consults her (28:9). The narrator makes no comment about her feelings. She cries out, but it is Saul who tells her to “have no fear” (28:13). It is tempting, therefore, to see this vision of the cry not as a sign of vulnerability, but as Saul’s projection. By contrast, for the medium it is a transformation, a pivot of affect. The medium uses the affective chaos that Saul brings to the event and continues to project to turn the tables; she swallows Saul’s fear and bellows it out, to preside over, and then dominate a situation that might have been very dangerous for all. Saul might be seduced into thinking that she shares his fear. This perhaps makes Samuel’s presence easier to bear. But he misses that spirits appearing is old news for the medium. She need not be afraid of Samuel’s presence (cf. Havea 2011: 262) nor of his anger. Instead, she will turn this emotional scene on its head.

So if not fear, then what? Could the cry be one of anger, *ressentiment* (cf. Coulthard 2014), an emotional excess? It is rebellion at the powerlessness of the medium in her own land, and at the suppression of her identity, her craft. It is rage at the irony of Saul seeking from her what he has outlawed, and at him swearing *by Yahweh* that she will be safe (28: 10). It is despair that she has no choice but to perform for Saul what he requires. Jobling’s description of her contrivances and artifice in the performance of the séance to protect herself has some traction here (Jobling 1998: 187). The exchange masquerades as a good show, a hint of the carnivalesque. Even as he is getting schooled by Samuel, however, Saul does not perceive the force behind the yell. Did Samuel, one wonders? *Ressentiment*, in fact, becomes the true liberating force here for the medium, even if, historically speaking, it will be short lived.

38 Compare Havea 2016, which sees fear as dominant in the scene, but also as a sign of Saul’s *dealing*, a sign of power in a situation where he is otherwise powerless. I cannot see this here; Saul does not seem to me to be “swimming in order to survive” (Havea 2016: 85).

The cry from the belly suggests something else too. It is a signal that what transpires ahead that is truly consequential is effected through sounds, smell, taste—through the work of the senses—and other bodily movements. When Samuel comes reluctantly out of his grave, it is his voice that is heard. Saul, already out of his comfort zone, is required to take the medium's description as authoritative: he himself cannot see the spirit, but "recognizes" him via a verbal description given to him.³⁹ It may seem inconsequential, but the text appears unequivocal that while one sees the ghost, the other cannot. Saul cannot recognize Samuel until he is led to do so; the medium, by contrast, can now fully *see* Saul for who he is, by virtue of her own spirit-managing. The affective (and affected?) cry not only marks, but also seems to *effect* the climax of the story. The medium might have given Saul his voice (Havea 2011: 259), but now she takes it over; the cry becomes generative. For Havea, it is birth (Havea 2011: 261)—but not, I suggest, of Saul. Is the contrast between the two parties' forms of knowing here significant? To be sure, it shows Saul's ineptitude further, but it also appears to authorize the work of the medium and to quantify what can be known in experiential, somatic, and affective terms.

The body's sensorial needs and responses are then the focus for when the encounter with Samuel is over.⁴⁰ Now, the medium asserts herself, ensuring her safety, if in fact she feels her life is in jeopardy because Samuel's message has not been what Saul might have hoped (Reis 1997: 12). She insists on reciprocity—"I listened to your voice, now hear mine" (28:21–22). The subjugated will have equal standing in the direction of future events. What she offers, however, is unexpected. Is a good meal what is needed for a man who is about to die? Or is she merely showing him hospitality or kindness? (Reis 1997: 4; Klein 2000: 273). The text is surprisingly detailed about the provenance of the food and its preparation.⁴¹ Flour is taken, kneaded, prepared. The calf is slaughtered (זֶבַח or "sacrificed"; Reis 1997). The text also takes care to plot out Saul's movements from his falling dramatically to the ground to his reluctant movement to the bed, and so on. I suggest that these ostensibly superfluous bodily concerns

39 Jobling thinks that the medium embellishes here; she might as well be using fake smoke and incense. See Jobling 1998: 187.

40 It is important to point out that these bodily murmurings were already making themselves known in the earlier scenes (1 Samuel 14–15) that I have discussed above with respect to hunger and eating.

41 Reis's hypothesis is that the making of the bread is particularly detailed, so as to show the lack of preparation (cooking) for the sacrificed (זֶבַח) calf (Reis 1997). This, she believes, is a cultically prepared sacrifice, and when Saul partakes, he is making a covenant with another deity.

are not only a means of relaying Saul's physical weakness, but that, in the medium's world, there are bodily ways of knowing that are being brought to the fore.

Again, the medium as ἐγγαστρίμυθος, or "belly myther," seems quite apt. While the patristic authors feared demonic speaking with the belly, we could read originary or indigenous forms of knowing, if you will, a bodily knowledge, that tells or teaches truer than what can be appreciated in permissible means. Although Saul could not see Samuel and could not understand the future, Saul is about to be taught other things, born(e) from the medium's own matrix. Indeed Eustathius makes much of the mythological part of the belly-myther's identity, considering what she has to say a fabrication—a falsehood (Mitchell 2007: cxvi). It is true, she *is* fabricating, but in the sense of re-telling, or telling/teaching differently. She is an allegorist (Mitchell 2007: cxiv)! She "uses the names of perceptible things ... to point to spiritual matters" (Mitchell 2007: cxv).⁴² The meal will not teach him what to do, or even what is to happen next, but it is an act that translates meaning elsewhere. It is about relation. To be sure, the offered meal could be a kindness, as many perceive, but more likely it is a protest, *ressentiment*. That may seem unexpected, but it does address the textual irony of feeding a dying man, the futility of which even Saul perceives. If, in the cry, there were anger and protest, the ensuing meal might answer that anger with an insistence that what is interior, what is in the province of the medium must be the source for the next action. Saul's "What shall I do?" (28:15) is answered by the medium's "You shall know what I know." This is the colonized person's experience of futility and loss, of sustaining the body when all conditions around it point to its suppression.⁴³

Still, it is not over for Saul once he has eaten, not yet. The last comment in 1 Samuel 28 is that Saul arose and went on his way. He went back, according to commentators' reckonings of geography, from having gone the *wrong way*. The geographical interruption effected by Saul's unscheduled detour is worthy of comment in a metastory so taken with movement across the land. It is interesting to note that the presence of the medium effects Saul's detour. For the return, one might say that her reliance on "gut knowledge" has a practical effect

42 I am using poor Eustathius out of context here. He is critiquing Origen for being like the belly-myther, fabricating what is not there.

43 Some more marginal readings of this part of the story perpetuate this perspective, as in Reis's proposal that the movement to the bed reveals (deferred) sexual congress and the "sacrificed" calf reveals the ingestion of blood as part of a cultic rite of covenant with a foreign god (Reis 1997: 13–14, 18). In this reading, the body is given a response and makes its own (futile) contracts with others around it.

on her future, in that it succeeds in removing Saul from her midst. As one of the many focal points or stops of the narrative's imagined geography, then, one might observe the medium's central—but disruptive—relation to the land as the Israelites idealize it. Aside from her own out-of-place positioning in the narrative's geographical trajectory, she nevertheless seems intimately rooted to the land, in ways on which Saul must depend. She is a fixture: her presence is immediately known by Saul's troops. She works, moreover, as a kind of axial presence, bringing up the dead from *out of the ground* (28: 13) to meet with the living.

In many ways, though, both Saul and the medium are “out of place.”⁴⁴ He is in the wrong place, according to battle logic and commentarial sensibilities. His misplacement, in fact, seems apparent in earlier parts of his story as well (1 Samuel 14–15). She is in the “right place,” for the purpose of effecting Saul's needs, but she is at perpetual risk. Already on the margins, in terms of her foreign citizenship (Jobling 1998: 186), she is also physically on the borders in a rapidly changing environment, and her future looks to be one of displacement. There is another kind of erasure in her story, though, which is less about citizenship and more about subjectivity. Her home surely no longer feels like hers, since her practices are outlawed, her compatriots have been exterminated, and she is in doubt for her future. We might say, using the geographical figure, that both Saul and the medium are *dysplaced*⁴⁵—they are “at home” in the land but suffer a *solistalgia* for a place of memory. Their sense of emplacement is interrupted by circumstances such as colonial encroachment and policing (the medium), or desertion by the framework that originally made sense of the occupation (Saul).

My suggestion here is that the spiritual, somatic, and geographical erasures and interruptions in the narrative provide another plane on which to think through events in the lives of both main and marginal characters. They are a form of textual excess, not in quantity, but in volume: their incidental presence can be heard loudly above other narrative details, if we listen. They form a backdrop, reflect a particular position, an otherstory. It may not be consistently the case that these elements entirely interrupt the imperial engine. There is no textual trick here revealing that the conquest and settlement of the land

44 See Havea 2011, where Havea uses this term not to refer to the geographical positioning of the Saul and the medium (and Samuel!), but to their general characterization. What I suggest might pair nicely with his take.

45 See Jackson 2011: 613–14 for her thought-provoking discussion of displacement as *dysplacement*—the idea that one can be in one's land, but there is dissociation because something renders it alien.

did not happen. For example, Saul's meal gets him up and on his way—toward his demise (the medium says as much [28:22]). Suppose, though, that bodily affects, sense responses, and alternative geographies, provided a foundation on which to build another story. This would not be the story that the Deuteronomist wanted to tell, but a means of reproducing events according to the *all-my-relations* nature of characters, creatures, places, and times.

In sum, what I am suggesting here would be in effect an openness to a retelling of the life of the indigenous woman of Endor and the implications of her actions.

In the last days of Saul, No-Name of Endor had a vision of that old, wizened nuisance, Samuel, who stank in death as much as he had in life. He was raving and complaining; spittle sprayed from his mouth all over his beard. Even after his death, he muttered and pronounced as if he had a direct line to the Settler.

Already, she had inserted him into her story. Through fire and smoke, she called on the other ancestors to be her witnesses. She prepared a calf for all who would gather.

"Send for the King!" she told her servant, seeing what would come.

There is thus a whole otherstory latent in this encounter. This *talanoa* (Havea 2016) could be one of *survivance* (Vizenor 1999; Vizenor [ed.] 2008),⁴⁶ where the colonized insist on presence where they have been absented, where ghosts of the dead or the assimilated⁴⁷ remain to challenge the story that dominates. Tracings of this otherstory are already in plain sight: in Endor's earlier refusal to be conquered (Josh. 17:12–13; cf. Donaldson 2005: 108); in the medium's fixity, expertise, and success; in the belly-myther's "ability to say [that] what is not there actually is" (Mitchell 2007: civ).

46 Vizenor describes *survivance* as an "active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name" (1999: vii). Donaldson mentions *survivance* in her discussion of the medium's haunting (Donaldson 2005: 109).

47 Donaldson explains:

Historical and discursive colonization depend on the creation of ghosts. Indeed, the layering of one society upon another occurs through the physical and symbolic violence requiring either the deaths of conquered peoples or their social suppression and assimilation. Colonization transforms them, in other words, into ghosts: "That special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present."

DONALDSON 2005: 110

Even while the otherstory is not “mainstream biblical studies” story to tell—a qualification one should take seriously, given the historical complexity of indigenous relationships with the biblical text and the impossibility of knowing what shape a re-written *version* might take—it is important to be reading in such a way as to make room for it to bloom through and even usurp dominant narratives. This means that mainstream biblical scholars would have to be comfortable with textual plurality in its broadest sense (cf. Porter and Malcolm 2013), loosening their grasp on the demands they make on the text, for example, for the idea that there is a single original text on which to commentate. Or it means questioning that all that comes to us as “reception” or “afterlife” is always that. *After*. Suppose that Thomas King’s *Old Woman and Young Man* (Donaldson 1998) *became* the Bible, long enough for us together to have a conversation about what it means to hear and tell these stories—as *stories*? Suppose there might be a methodological map in Nisga’a poet Jordan Abel’s *Injun*, which poetically retells the story of colonialism in combination with cultural appropriations of *injuns* from pulp fiction westerns (2016). In some part, this is reception- or cultural history of the Bible done in a key that asks how past communities of interpretation have affected the present, and how they might affect the future. But it is also an invitation to the not-biblical to become a partner in the conversation: not an either/or, but a both/and. Put another way, it is to give ourselves license to refashion the text—in effect to do openly and purposefully what readers are doing in some small part all the time.

Recognition, “Reconciliation,” and Other Ways of Knowing

As a means of concluding, I want to identify some suggestions for moving forward. Without reducing the impact of the TRC to just the few key ideas with which I have been working, it seems to me that the following are useful preparations to make by “mainstream biblical studies,” if, in fact, it means to work towards “reconciliation,” however that is to be specifically defined:

- the exploration of opportunities for co-interpretation with indigenous communities, either in conjunction with such collaborative ecclesial work already underway, or independent of it;
- detailed analysis of the biblical texts, concepts, and themes that undergird or comprise the culture and curricula of IRS, as well as the experiences of survivors;

- exploration of the ways in which biblical material has supported or informed settler policies, laws, and practices from first contact in Canada in the 1600s to the present;
- investigation of the textures of colonial biblical narratives, with a view to trying to work out alternative and reconciliatory ways of reading.

It is with the last, of course, that this paper has primarily been concerned. The intention in this kind of work is not to erase such narratives, but to explore the opportunity for plural readings and bring about dialogue for thinking and reading differently. As is clear, a number of my colleagues have begun this kind of important work elsewhere, but the IRS and the TRC remain significant factors with which to contest, as does the tooling of postcolonial readings of biblical narratives specifically for Canadian histories, themes, and ideas. As noted, though, the question remains whether such “reconciliation” might be possible with a text whose story of conquest remains exactly that (cf. Boer 2012), no matter how cleverly we read it.

As discussed above, Warrior insists that the answer to the question of the suitability of biblical stories for indigenous communities cannot be settled while indigenous people remain colonial subjects (Warrior 2005). Weaver counter-proposes (2005), however, that even subjugated subjects might find a means of engagement and negotiation via alternative stories. These, as we saw, have been variously proposed by scholars such as Donaldson and Havea, and used to promising effect. What I hope I have been detailing here is not just another story, but a way of thinking about stories, about approach. This works not against erasure, but with it; not in spite of gaps, but because of them. Reading and thinking in this way might offer biblical criticism a key that is open to orality, that might make bridges with survivor stories, and that offers non-professional, interdisciplinary, intertextual, and inter-corporeal relationships, among many others.

For biblical scholars writing from or thinking about the Canadian context in particular, this means wrestling with the particularities of the discipline in Canada, its histories, shapes, and forms. As I have argued elsewhere, these are strikingly similar to those of their European roots, except perhaps the field here has remained slightly more risk averse and traditional in its approach (Black 2012). But there are other aspects of the Canadian context that would and should impact biblical reading post-TRC. One could mention, for instance, Canada’s particular form of multiculturalism, or its physical and geographical environment. These might provide useful contextual lenses for making room for or co-creating new stories. As I indicated above, this work also should not be done absent of the important archival research that would explore the

biblical presence in IRS contexts and survivor accounts. Neither should it be done without serious engagement with the rupturing of *ressentiment*, as evidenced in protest movements such as *Idle No More*.⁴⁸ Practically speaking, this might mean biblical scholars could be meaningful allies in such protests. Textually speaking, it might mean that reading in the service of smooth ideologies gives way to the rupture of anger and dissent in texts and reading communities alike.

This brings me to some work which may appear tangential, but is, I think, an important way of further developing “mainstream biblical studies” to be both engaged and interdisciplinary—if we really are interested in the voices that stand out. Many of the protests undertaken by indigenous peoples and allies in Canada recently (e.g., as part of *Idle No More*) have targeted an endless catalogue of specific, material crises, for example, access to fresh water, pipelines, environmental/land rights, and missing and murdered women and girls, and so on. It is a stretch to say that my reading of 1 Samuel 28 could have direct implications for these issues, but readings of the predominant colonial narratives of Canadian culture in the spirit in which I developed here, *are* in line with the TRC’s recommendation that religious organizations “repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: §49).⁴⁹ These are also readings that are invested in land, in body, in spirit, and in the implications of how those concepts are in historical and contemporary relations to each other. So, might one bring such work into dialogue with, for example, *dysplacement* and environmental pollution on the Aamjiwnaang First Nations Reserve near Sarnia through the sense of smell (Jackson 2011), or on the diminishment of indigenous land with the death of its non-human species through *acquacide* (Donaldson 2003), or the stories of genocide written by incarcerated indigenous persons (Adema 2015)? The creation of connections between present-day forms of colonialism and their material effects and texts which may (or may not) support such forms might be fruitful for the future. This kind of work might even have the

48 An indigenous movement started in October, 2012 in response to the Canadian government’s bill (C-45), which aimed to make changes to the Indian Act. See Storrie 2015 for a thought-provoking discussion of indigenous resurgence movements as being carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense: namely, both liberatory and transformative. See also Runions 2000 for a comparative reading of Numbers 16 and protests on indigenous land in Canada with respect to violent strategies of colonization that is prescient in anticipating what needs to be done in the discipline post-TRC.

49 Brett is undertaking this kind of project in a sustained way in trying to unpack the biblical foundations of such discourses in Australia; see Brett 2008.

added bonus of relieving some of the malaise of “mainstream biblical studies” that I noted when I first began this essay.

Finally, as Donaldson has done (1998), and as the TRC suggests, it also seems logical that a text and a reading such as this one might cause us to turn our sights onto pedagogical issues.⁵⁰ The TRC anticipates change in theological pedagogies and the future training of new clergy. Surely, though, critical, self-reflective analysis of biblical material as cultural text with a view to understanding its implication in settler ideologies and politics is impactful for all students of religion and culture, especially in Canada and the United States. For example, Donaldson’s model of polycentric multiculturalism might destabilize reader- and text-dominated binaries, allowing students to see plural voices in all their relations (Donaldson 1998: 94). Canadian studies scholars might respond, however, that multiculturalism is a concept that is as troubled as it is helpful, relying, for example, on “stereotype, ensuring that ethnic groups will preserve their distinctiveness in a gentle and insidious form of cultural apartheid” (Bisoondath 1994: 191). A model such as Donaldson’s would rightly have to be contextualized and unpacked for the classrooms in which it is explored.

There is a confluence in the spirit medium of Endor helping Saul to see into the future and this collection of essays attempting to think through a future for biblical studies. It is tempting to see the scene in 1 Samuel as one that speaks to the perils of gazing into the future. More properly, however, it speaks to the importance of seeking out other ways of thinking and knowing, other ways of understanding the past, all the while resisting its appropriation so that disciplinary mainstreams may find a way to feel good about their efforts at “reconciliation.”⁵¹ Saul’s experience also tells us, however, that gazing into the future in unexpected ways may not give us the answers we are looking for. The medium’s knowledge requires an openness to hear differently and to be transformed by what we hear.

50 See Donaldson 1998; Segovia 1998, 2000; Segovia and Tolbert (eds.) 1998.

51 See Jobling, who is intent in his study of 1 Samuel, to show that the Deuteronomist is not able to maintain the continuity and seamlessness of history that it desires (1998: 303). He argues that a true search for the past would be to investigate the ruptures and displacements of the historical record. The story of the medium is one such. I agree with Jobling, but wonder if we must be more radical than this. His idea of “the past,” even a critically pursued one, seems to me to still be nostalgic for something that retains the imbalances and erasures of the colonial story, and in ways that fundamentally cannot make room for the subaltern. Indeed, there are other pasts to be had, but they must be written, perhaps written in the belly.

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The Power of Canonised Motifs: The Chance for Biblical Studies in a Secular, Canonically Illiterate World?

Jorunn Økland

The “Fuels” Driving the Historical-Critical Method and What Happens When the Traditional “Fuel” Runs Out

Whereas biblical studies as a critical discipline aiming for historical accuracy materialized from within the discourse of Protestant Christianity with the principle of *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”) as its “fuel,” current cutting-edge research is, at the moment, “fuelled” by other energy sources more epistemologically aligned with the hermeneutical fact that we can never have “scripture alone” since the historical contexts of the various biblical books and the positionality of the interpreter cannot be eliminated from influencing the process of interpretation.¹ In this essay I will elaborate on a couple of these “fuels” that I think will drive biblical studies in the coming years. But, first, a few more words about the opposite end of historical criticism, its beginning, and why the presuppositions driving its development can no longer work as “fuel” to generate cutting-edge work in biblical studies today.

Sola scriptura, a slogan credited to the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther, expresses the special status of the Bible as source of divine revelation in Protestant Christianities. But with the accumulated historical and hermeneutical knowledge we possess today, the notion of “scripture alone” is an

1 This is, of course, not to deny the value of previous erudite and scholarly interpretations. As commentaries on biblical books and topics, they went well beyond merely quoting the Bible as part of theological and philosophical arguments. However, the difference is that after the closure of the canon, the interpretations were more or less aligned with church authorities. What changed in the sixteenth century onwards was the introduction of the self-authorisation of the (scholarly trained) reader. For an overview, see the eight-volume series, *Bible de tous les temps* (Kannengiesser, et al. [eds.] 1984–89). Neither does this deny the philosophical critique of biblical authority, which—represented by, for example, someone such as Baruch Spinoza—created the space for the discipline of historical criticism; see Spinoza 2007; Frampton 2006; Preus 2001. This philosophical critique, which created a space for a non-church-loyal critique of the Bible in Europe, is nowadays usually seen as one more step along the trajectory from Protestant reformation to modern secularization of scholarship and religious life.

impossibility. If we approach this ideal principle as hermeneutically impossible, we can better understand why various Protestant denominations have chosen such diverse emphases or aspects in their amplification of it. In spite of the variations, the *sola scriptura* principle means that in Protestant traditions, compared to Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, the Bible is not only seen in greater isolation from Tradition,² but also reckoned with higher esteem relatively speaking, given the absence of sources of competing authority.

Because of the unique authority given to the Bible, it was also within the Protestant traditions that the need for more systematic historical-critical biblical scholarship arose for the first time during the Enlightenment period.³ A reconsideration of the Bible—now as a collection of books from different historical periods with inherent ethical, theological, or historical claims that could not always easily be aligned—led to a historical questioning of the Bible from the eighteenth century onwards. If only scripture is to be authoritative, what if the current understandings of the Bible's content, message, and ethics given in (Protestant) dogmas and church hierarchies are built on false premises? The development that followed to explore the Bible with critical tools and methods—in a historical way as a result of cultures, societies, and power struggles of the past—was in my view “fuelled” and driven by this special importance given to the Bible. Preference was given to historical research into primitive Christianity driven by the notion that whatever a New Testament text would have meant in its original historical context, that would be the objective and definitive meaning of the text.⁴ From there on, many, mainly Continental scholars (Zachhuber 2013: 1–20), would argue that that meaning

2 I am here referring to the most general, Catholic notion of “Tradition” possible, the one that sees the “close connection and communication between” Scripture (Bible) and Tradition, sees them “merge into a unity and tend toward the same end ... Therefore both sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence” (Vatican Council 1965: § 9, with note referring back to the Council of Trent, to emphasise that this is just a mid-twentieth century formulation of an older view). The Bible can therefore not be interpreted in isolation from Tradition. With a lower case “t,” I will later in the essay use the term “tradition” as a collective body of interpretations and engagements, whether religiously sanctioned or not (see section on “Text, Tradition, Reception” below).

3 But see references to the pioneering Spinoza (who had a Jewish background) in the footnote above. His critique emerged in a post-Reformation European epistemic environment, so he prepared the way for Protestant historical scholarship on the Bible that he helped shape.

4 See Baur 1859, 1873.

was also normative for believers today.⁵ Hence there was also the need for the church to know and embrace this kind of historical research. If the Bible is to be the only norm, one needs to be sure about what it says! But there was, in principle, no problem for this type of Protestantism to break with traditional understandings of biblical passages if a particular tradition of interpretation could be proven to be wrong. The irony, again, is that for a long time the tools, methods, and insights of historical research were looked upon with suspicion by the Protestant churches themselves. In any case, the historical-critical approach has provided critics and dissidents from all faiths and confessions with an invaluable toolbox, language, and further fuel for liberation struggles of various kinds.

Today, in light of the vast advances in a more epistemologically-based hermeneutics, even most Protestant theologians will acknowledge that religious and cultural traditions colour our interpretations of scripture. This makes it much more urgent to research also the traditions that have brought us the Bible in its current material and canonical forms, and the filters we have been taught to use to appropriate it. I see reception history as partly driven by this sort of “fuel.”

Text, Tradition, Reception

In many ways, “reception” is a less normatively defined term than “tradition” for roughly the same phenomenon *as applied in biblical studies*: a culturally continuous stream of interpretations, transmissions, and elaborations over a common theme or of a sacred text. However, biblical reception studies have tended to be more comprehensive than history of biblical interpretation, which has focused on more academic interpretations in written form. Reception history includes studies not only of scholarly literature on the Bible but also of writings by ordinary people, preachers, politicians, philosophers as well as allusions in

5 With the disintegration of the historical and the systematic subjects in theology that developed through the nineteenth century (Zachuber 2013: 286), and which translated in the Anglophone realm into the establishment of a separate Society for *Biblical Literature* in 1888), there was also an increasing number of biblical scholars who favoured not only a division of labour between historical criticism and application, but also a delegation of the latter task to theologians. This approach has later proven impossible with the discovery of the crucial role of the reader in interpretation.

music, film, visual and other art forms, for example.⁶ Although I have previously argued in favour of the broadest possible understanding of what studies in reception and transmission of the Bible should be about, on this occasion I want to hold onto the more normative notion of “Tradition” for a moment. What is “fueling” the development of reception history is, to my mind, not only the perpetual need for scholarship to find new areas of research, not only the possibility of exploring the range of meanings that a biblical text can enable through studying its appropriations and interpretations, and not only the fact that reception history gives those tired and fed up with organised religion or religious practices a thrilling opportunity to explore how this foundational book is appropriated in other human spheres. What to my mind is “fueling” this change on a deeper level are two drives: one that is epistemological and another that is more confessional-normative.

By an epistemological drive, I am referring to the hermeneutical realization that there is no such thing as a bird’s eye view, or “God’s view,” of the history in which biblical books were written. Scholars know better today that whatever we conclude regarding the historical origins of biblical books, it can never be the full picture since we are not disembodied observers (Benhabib 1992: 71, 203–241). As important as it is to find answers to our questions regarding historical beginnings, it is more important to analyse the history that produced our questions in the first place.

By a more confessional-normative drive, I refer to the fact that the majority of biblical studies is still undertaken by people who came to the field via some kind of grooming by a religious community, thus they may carry with them realizations of how they themselves are part of a continuum of existential *and* academic engagement with the text. If they came from a Protestant background, they would notice how not even all previous adherents to the ideal principle of *sola scriptura* had arrived at the same conclusions when they researched the Bible, and how this is not due to any lack of dedication or in-depth scrutiny on the part of these researchers. Through confrontation with biblical interpretations from all sorts of geographical and confessional locations, we are all forced to acknowledge that religious and cultural traditions side by side with the commitment to *sola scriptura* colour our interpretations of scripture. As mentioned above, this insight makes it much more urgent to research also the traditions (or Traditions) that have brought us the Bible in its current material and canonical forms, and the questions and discussions through which certain forms of interpretation have become conventional and

6 For further detail on my views, see Burnette-Bletsch and Økland 2014; Økland 2009: 1–11.

hegemonic in a religious-scholarly setting, while other questions and interpretations are rejected. Because of this, reception history is also carried out in biblical scholarship within a more confessional setting.⁷

In sum, it is no longer sufficient to study only how and when the Bible came into being. It is perhaps even more important to study how it has come to the contemporary world with a power that causes people to show interest in it and consider it normative even today. How did the biblical books survive the centuries? How did Bibles form distinct Traditions, of which I have only dealt with here those associated with *sola scriptura*?⁸ A comparative study of the Bible's history of transmission, with transmission histories of other canonised books such as the Odyssey discussed below, will only clarify, I believe, the extent to which the Bible is a special case in this regard, although similarities can also be found.

Many examples could be mentioned for the purpose of illustration, but particularly noteworthy is how the change in what drives biblical studies has had very visible effects even in the more "empirical" and material strands of New Testament scholarship: namely, textual history and criticism.

Previously, the point of exploring canonical and textual history was to develop tools that allowed scholars to arrive at the earliest possible version of biblical books, the one closest to an "original" composed, for example, by a Paul, a Luke, or a John. Next, the point of biblical studies would be to "exegete," to "spell out" what the original author meant with his original text in its original context in order to either distill a timeless message or align a biblical message with today's circumstances.

Today, rather than researching a text in order to arrive at its earliest possible version and treat it as the closest to a hypothesised, normative, but lost original, scholars of textual history and criticism increasingly understand the manuscripts as more than just witnesses to particular expressions or variants of a biblical book. The meaning content of texts cannot be dissolved from their material form without loss of meaning and context. This means that we also need to study, for example, the scroll (papyrus or parchment quality), codex, ink, paint, gold, fabric, fingerprints that brought us the text (Scherbenske 2013: 8). Hence, there is more emphasis on analysing the manuscripts in all their

7 This has been less of a problem for Catholic scholars, of course, as their institutional system has never seen the Bible in isolation from Church Tradition, and so this whole Protestant argument is probably superfluous to them.

8 There is some recognition also beyond the circles of biblical scholars that Bibles have generated Traditions, as seen, for example, from the title of the seminal work of Gerhard Ebeling (Ebeling 1947).

material variations. Whereas this has been done for a long time as a means to get at the original wording of a biblical author, the “fuel” driving this research has changed, so that it now also involves scholars driven by new materialist theories,⁹ reception studies, and an interest in “histories of the book.” Particular manuscripts are increasingly read as emblems of the social histories of the communities that sponsored their production. This does not mean that the texts are no longer seen as holding semantic power—rather their force is seen as truly multi-layered: a particular Christian community wanted to pass on a particular text, so each manuscript is a testament also to how that community related to its sacred texts. Why did this community choose exactly this text and this form? Why did they deviate on this point? How much extra expenditure did they add, and why? How they understood the writing’s content is just one part of this story.

The other side of this new interest is that many textual critics are eager to point out what was wrong with the previous fixation with the original, or what was arguably closest to the original manuscript of a biblical text. As Eva Mroczek writes: “Classic methods of textual criticism that attempt to recover an original or final text are shown to be working in the realm of disembodied fantasy, creating ideal texts that never actually existed in any physical form” (Mroczek forthcoming).¹⁰ Further, it diverted the attention from other fascinating stories of how early Christian writings found their form gradually as part of the fourth-century canon after an extensive period of editing, completing, or paraphrasing.

This approach has opened up a new world of material biblical studies, and in a form that is much more aligned with forms of Christianity in which Tradition is important. One can expect material biblical studies to be engaged in closer dialogue with scholarship that explores “histories of the book.” We can also expect greater engagements with the broader field of translation studies, and the use of Bibles as evidence of linguistic developments (e.g., dialects or the spread of Christian glossa and terminology). Bibles are the historical linguists’ dream evidence and material because of their synchronically and diachronically broad distribution. Further, Bibles are important evidence for studying

9 Although not de-centering the human completely, in this historical biblical studies context, new materialism is about listening more to the material track record humans leave behind, and explore what kind of information it could yield. See Connolly 2013.

10 See also Ehrman 1994 regarding the shift away from the attempt to establish the original text to studies in the social and theological motivations behind the corruption of the early textual forms, and Ehrman 1993 regarding the information we can gain on the early Christological controversies from studying textual variants.

the relationship between oral and written languages in the Two-Thirds world, since the Bible has often been the first book produced in the written form of a language. The Bible has played a hugely important role in transforming orality to literacy and in processes of colonisation through translation. This research is already happening, but much of it takes place outside of the scholarly community that understands itself as the “discipline of biblical studies.”¹¹

Ancient Mediterranean Motifs, Geographies, and Canons in Current Meaning-Making Practice

The example mentioned in the previous section, textual criticism, traditionally deals with the text of the New Testament in its earliest stages of development with the goal of recovering the original reading. But the Bible is still being engaged and used in processes of meaning-making in today's world, where the Bible is not just “owned” by some organised religious communities. The Bible is increasingly seen as part of a shared heritage and read for its literary value, or read alongside other canonical books.¹² My next two cases will reflect these two tendencies, respectively.

Many canonised writings already share so much that they increasingly merge in the minds of non-scholars. First, because these writings are all canonised; they are all, in other words, culturally elevated books. Second, they, especially the writings I deal with here, also stem from a relatively limited part of the world, the Mediterranean and the ancient Near East. Third, as such, these writings share much of the geographical frame of reference as well as

11 I am talking here about my own *alma mater*: The University of Oslo. There, the Faculty of Theology is no longer the largest hub for doing research on the Bible; instead, it is the Faculty of Humanities. The classicists have at all times at least one project on early translations of the New Testament (e.g., old Latin or Syriac) in search for older language forms. The linguists, too, study Bible translations for comparative and theoretical purposes. See, for example, the completed project, “PROIEL: Pragmatic Resources in Old Indo-European Languages,” which was built on old translations of the New Testament (University of Oslo 2008–2012). A small selection of other sample projects include Yri 2003; Haug, et al. 2009; and Issa 2015. These projects require high linguistic competence but show little interest in hermeneutics or in deciphering the messages or the meanings of the Bible. Hence, the scholars in question rarely go to biblical studies conferences.

12 In this essay, I am operating with a pragmatic understanding of canonicity as explored in our project “Canonicity, Gender and Critique: The Hermeneutics of Feminism and Canon Transformations” (University of Oslo 2008–2014). See also Økland and Stordalen 2014, Kermode 2004: 32–50 and Lim 2017.

many motifs, such as the motif of thirst, burning sun, or desert. Both of the examples I will discuss make an issue out of geography and whether the geography is recognisable or alien. They also both make important points regarding some of the motifs cutting across canonised writings from the ancient Mediterranean and the ancient Near East. These motifs are studied with new interest today, often with a more general aim to understand the scope of human communication. According to the organisers of a 2017 conference, motifs as communicative tools in texts, images, and sounds represent “a constant flow of meaning” that activates a play of relations among aesthetics, context, and rhetoric (www.thepowerofmotifs.com). The symbolic horizon of a motif relates to and encompasses humans, things and artefacts, geography and nature, and thus contributes to connecting the horizons of the main examples discussed in this essay. The escalating interest in history as a fundament for identitarian and antidemocratic movements demonstrates the continued social and political agency of historical motifs (e.g., found in canonised writings considered foundational) and their interference with contemporary challenges. They are therefore important subjects of critical interpretation.

Motifs and Details in Literature

In 2017, Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgård received the Jerusalem prize, a prize awarded by the Jerusalem International Book Fair biennially in order to honour writers who express with excellence the idea of individual freedom within the context of the larger society.

In his acceptance speech in Jerusalem (Knausgård 2017),¹³ Knausgård took his cue from the location as the “city that houses perhaps the most transformative and defining texts known to us.” That text is, of course, the Bible. It is clear that Knausgård is tacitly assuming the Protestant Christian version of the Bible. Knausgård goes on to point out the vast differences between his country of origin and the Middle East, geographically, climatically, and culturally. Yet, he continues:

[D]uring my schooling in the 1970s, ... stories from this region were of central importance—in the classroom, for example, we had three maps: one of Norway, one of the world, and one of biblical Israel.... Tales from the Bible were as important as the stories that belonged to our own history. We were taught about Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, about Joseph and his brothers and about Moses and Aaron as a matter of course, they

13 All following quotes are from the speech unless otherwise stated, and are taken from the downloadable, unpaginated file at the website.

were a part of our notional world and were woven into the culture, as object lessons in being human and expressions of the link between the human realm and the divine. However, we were the last generation for whom this was a given.

As someone who went to school in the same system during the same years, I can confirm this. And I am certain that it has coloured my view of the Bible as a living and interesting ancient document. To people with this cultural frame of reference, biblical scholarship has been of some interest: new knowledge of historical realities as well as experimental new readings that might illuminate, for instance, gendered, ethnic, or psychological aspects of the relationships between Moses and Aaron, between Abraham and Isaac, or between Jesus and Mary. Such explorations of human motifs found in the Bible have been common in the type of scholarship on the Bible to which *Biblical Interpretation* is dedicated, but were not taught in connection with the Bible to young pupils at school in the 1970s.

However, Knausgård also points out that our generation of Norwegians were the last generation for whom the Bible is a self-evident part of our cultural reference framework. As an emerging writer, Knausgård turned away from biblical motifs when his interest was caught instead by radical changes in society and how these changes took form in human flesh and experience: changes in identities and expressions of gender, changes in national and religious identity and belonging (Knausgård 1998). He felt pulled towards questions of “identity, the relationship between the one and the many”—a relationship spelt out in gory detail and sprawling over 2,000 pages in Knausgård’s *My Struggle* (Knausgård 2009–2011). As a biblical scholar, I too find increasingly that my aspiration to offer new and, for non-scholars, “surprising” and hopefully eye-opening interpretations of the Bible no longer works. These “non-traditional” interpretations produced to unsettle the status quo and the general hegemony of what the texts mean do not work in a secular cultural context, simply because no one cares when one has never heard of Sarah or Phoebe or Jezebel in the first place. One will not find any interpretations surprising when one never learnt what were the conventional explanations or interpretations of the relevant passages. Instead, the biblical texts become interesting only when biblical motifs have explanatory force in relation to trivial or existential issues that people recognise here and now. The fact that a story is found in the Bible no longer counts in and of itself. So future biblical scholars need to qualify as both storytellers, interpreters, and general providers of the “arts and crafts” of interpretation, such as historical and linguistic background and knowledge. This

makes the task very different, of course, and it will require a different training: perhaps not only original languages but also drama? The stories that will catch a broader interest may have to be about the transmission of a biblical text as much as they are about its content, as mentioned above.

Knausgård's best book in my view, uses as a central motif the Noah story (I may be professionally biased in this estimation) braided with a lengthy discourse on angelology and framed by the story of the novel's sad narrator. Its title, *En tid for alt* or *A Time for Everything* (Knausgård 2004), is itself a quote from Eccl. 3:1. In many ways, the novel's core part, which transports the story of Noah and the flood into nineteenth-century Western Norwegian geography and culture, could be read as a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 3. This book deserves special mention, because it is clear that the Jerusalem prize committee was particularly fascinated by it too. Knausgård states in his Jerusalem speech that he wanted to explore how the relations between the divine and the earthbound changed as the angels approached biological life: "I wrote a long essay about the fall of the angels: about how, from the timeless sphere of divinity, they approached closer and closer to biological life and were eventually trapped in it, as if flung into an evolutionary centrifuge ... I wanted to speculate about why and how the relation between the divine and the earthbound changed." And this topic is what unites medieval angelology with the Genesis stories of creation, fall, the sons of God who took women of the earth, and Noah, in *A Time for Everything*.

Knausgård found that he could not write about this approximation of angels and humans without including the Genesis story. But he also found that he lacked the knowledge of the historical-critical biblical scholar or of the region's natives about the "living conditions or the landscape ... camels or palm trees, kaftans and sandals." In other words, he lacked knowledge about basic living conditions simply presupposed or assumed in the Bible. Rather than writing only *after* having read up on all these topics like a biblical scholar would have to (Knausgård's "Plan A"), Knausgård decided instead to go for a "Plan B": to transport the world of Noah to Western Norway, to a landscape of deep fjords and high mountains:

I was toying with concepts of distance and closeness, but it wasn't just an idle game, for in a certain sense it was also true: going back in time, for generation after generation the stories of the Bible had been an integrated part of life in that part of Norway.... The characters too were diminished, their lives became more trivial, they now had petty concerns not unlike our own.

What became interesting and productive for Knausgård during the writing process was no longer just the biblical stories in themselves, but the way they had “incarnated” as a Norwegian story through generations of reading and reception. The geographical aspect of the canonised text, and the way it has to be applied to various particular landscapes, climates, and cultural forms, is a theme to which we will return.

In his speech, Knausgård also employs a biblical motif in an interpretation of the Utøya incident, where the man formerly named Anders Behring Breivik (now Fjotolf Hansen) killed 69 young members of the Labour party on their summer camp. In his need to understand and explain what happened, Knausgård turns to the story of Cain and Abel in the Bible, with its motif of brotherly relations and jealousy. He quotes the reaction of Cain after Yahweh's warning in Gen. 4:5 (“It burned in Cain, and his face fell”), and then adds his own unfolding of the motif, which is at the same time an interpretation of the Utøya event and how someone could commit such an atrocity: “There lies the centre of the story, its core—not greatness, not sacrifice, not God or the divine, but smallness, an emotion that suddenly fills a human being entirely and is woven into his fabric. It has never been expressed better.” Yet, Knausgård explicitly does not want to reduce the story into modern individual psychologising, although he acknowledges at the same time that applying biblical motifs on to one's own time and life is something that all peoples have done over the course of history. This, in turn, is the clue to the survival of the biblical text. In “The Selfish Text” (Pyper 1998), Hugh Pyper describes how the Bible has this amazing ability to engender host organisms that see it as their task to reproduce this text. We find Knausgård speaking from the side of the host organisms when he identifies what he sees as the cause of this reproduction: “[The biblical texts] are unfathomable, which also means that they always contain something more than their interpretations.”

Finally, in his speech for the Jerusalem prize, Knausgård goes beyond the discussions of his use of biblical motifs and messages. He also reflects on their medium, the particular way of phrasing the motifs through minute, concrete, Near Eastern details. He describes his work as a consultant for the translation committee of Norwegian Bible Society during their work on the new translation of the Old and New Testaments, and how he discovered—during his work of transforming the awkward Norwegian of the draft translations from original Hebrew or Greek into a more fluent, contemporary style—that the abstractions and euphemisms found in the previous official Norwegian translation from 1978 were not there in the new, raw drafts from the translators (biblically and linguistically trained academics contracted by the Norwegian Bible Society). Although not reading the original languages himself, Knausgård

realized from the raw draft translations by the biblical scholars/translators that “the small and local was present in the original texts, too ... there, everything was physical, concrete, narrated through action and dialogue.” Where the previous official translation from 1978 had preferred abstract theological principles, Knausgård sought to retain and protect the concreteness he found in the new draft translations through the stages of the translation process so that it could reach the general public (Knausgård 2011). One can only speculate if this acute attention to the small, local, physical, and concrete detail that Knausgård found in the biblical language was one of his sources of inspiration when he, towards the end of the preparatory stage of the new Norwegian Bible translation, embarked on his own six-volume project, *My Struggle*, in which he expressed the pain of the contemporary through a language of small, local, physical, and concrete detail on a widescreen of 2,000 pages.¹⁴ Thus, this Bible translation project, in which I also participate,¹⁵ shows a lasting important task for biblical scholars in religious traditions where biblical translation is acceptable and never completed:¹⁶ to continue to open the Hebrew and Greek texts for writers and commentators like Knausgård by translating anew, or at least by contributing with our material and historical knowledge to critique and assure quality of existing translations.¹⁷

The fact that Knausgård chose in his acceptance speech to talk about several different encounters with the Bible and biblical motifs through his work as a writer and translation consultant is in itself significant. It says something about the place the Bible might yet retain in a secular culture seeking a common story through common motifs from a shared heritage. His reflections are formulated in aesthetic language whereas biblical scholars might arrive at similar conclusions regarding the contemporary relevance of biblical motifs and language along slightly different and more analytical paths. It is a bit

14 The new official translation of a Bible (including both Old and New Testament) was published in 2011, two years after the first volume of *My Struggle*. The print version of this Bible is over 1,500 pages, but *My Struggle I–VI* is close to 2,000. The previous translation was first published in 1978 and was revised in 1985.

15 The complete version of the new Bible translation (including both Testaments and the Apocrypha) will finally be published in 2018.

16 This is mostly true of Protestants. Translation is problematic in the Catholic tradition where Latin Vulgate still holds primacy. In the Greek Orthodox church, translation is still highly questionable and regulated, as seen in Article 3 of the Constitution of Greece; likewise is the translation of the Torah within a Jewish context.

17 A small contribution in this regard is Økland 2016, where I try to show what difference it makes if Bible translators also have detailed knowledge of the material culture of the biblical *matrix*. I plan to write more on this in the coming years.

disconcerting to think of the fact that had Knausgård read the historical critical scholarship I was referring to in the first part of this essay, he might not have felt forced to form a “Plan B” in the writing of *A Time for Everything*, a plan replacing historical critical scholarship with close attention to the alienating distance of geographical details, the simplicity in the storytelling, the personal engagement, the focus on reading as an activity in a continuum—Knausgård transported the Noah story to a Western Norwegian setting with very fruitful results.

*From “That Ingenious Hero Who Travelled Far and Wide” to
“A Wandering Aramean Was My Ancestor”: “Refugee Readings”
and Blending of Motifs and Canons*

My final case extends the optic to a broader view of Western canonised texts. Like the previous cases raised by Knausgård’s Jerusalem speech, this case also focuses on the recycling of canonical motifs in contemporary meaning production, but this time it is not filtered through the aesthetic gaze of a celebrated novelist. Instead, the interpreters here are refugees who are not necessarily well acquainted with European canonised texts. The refugees speak through an intermediary, an article in English written by an American professor. This example demonstrates a new form of contemporary re-reading not “fuelled” by academic questioning, Protestant dogmatics, or any urge to reproduce a “Western canon” in itself, but by the forces of migration and the need to come to terms with the situation through social engagements of literary motifs. It is the beginning of a reply to Michael Allan when he asks: “How is literature productive of the terms within which the world is understood?” (Allan 2016: 4).

Historical-critical scholarship has analysed biblical texts alongside ancient texts like Gilgamesh or those by Homer, Aristotle, and Seneca for a long time,¹⁸ but it has tended to do so in pursuit of causal relationships. Central questions in this type of research has been whether one of the already canonised texts influenced the biblical author in question. Or, was Paul part of a Stoic school (e.g., Engberg-Pedersen 2000)? I too will bring Homer and the Bible together under the heading of shared motifs, but focus mostly on the former and draw on Hebrew Bible passages only for comparison, since I have throughout

18 See, for example, the work of Hans Dieter Betz and his “school” (Adela Yarbro Collins, David Hellholm, and others). A good example is Betz 1961. See also, more recently, MacDonald 2001. For a comparative attempt with closer affinity to this essay, see Stroumsa 2000.

been speaking of “canonised texts” but so far focused mostly on the Protestant Bible.

The Odyssey is the latest of two epic cycles ascribed to “Homer.” It is considered a foundational text in western culture and thus more or less at the same level as the Bible in this cultural domain. It is no coincidence that the Society of Biblical Literature paired the two when they named their resource website “Bible Odyssey” (<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/>).

The late eighth- to early seventh-century BCE work describes the strenuous boat journey of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, to try to reach his home island with his men after the end of the Trojan war. It also describes his son Telemachos's search for his father. After 10 years of trials and uncertainty, Odysseus did reach “home” as the only survivor of all the men he initially brought along. Conventional readings place much emphasis on Odysseus's glorious return, reinstatement, and reunion with his wife Penelope. His bravery, intelligence, and determination are also often noted.¹⁹ However, as we shall see, the latter motifs play less of a part in readings by people finding themselves forced to undertake similarly strenuous journeys today. These virtues are basic requirements for people leaving their home for something far less certain. More interesting is how they interpret the account of the journey itself.

On one of the first Sundays of 2016, I took a walk over to the Omonia Square in Athens. This is not the square usually televised around the world whenever there are protests and unrest in Greece due to the lethal combination of local financial crisis; floods of refugees landing on Greek island beaches from neighbouring countries of war and terror; and closure of western ears, eyes, hearts and minds against the unspeakable sufferings that the refugees have gone through before even arriving here. No, Omonia is rougher, dirtier, and closer to where many refugees are camping while in transit; it is a convenient hangout spot for them.

Due to the financial crisis, Athens had cancelled its annual practice of putting up a large Christmas tree on Syntagma Square, the central square of Athens. This was both a measure to save money and a token way to show the international money lenders that Athens and Greece are now cutting costs wherever they can. But over at the nearby Omonia Square, they had instead placed a steel wire installation in the shape of a traditional Greek boat with sail, the *Karavaki*. On the islands, it has been an old custom to decorate a boat for Christmas, but Athens has for a long time preferred the more modern

19 For a more ambiguous understanding of this character in antiquity (and in modern literary scholarship), see Montiglio 2011.

Christmas tree. The *Karavaki* is associated with many motifs: the boat was an early Christian symbol; St. Nicholas, the saint associated with Christmas and gift exchange, was also the saint of sailors; the boat was also a way of saying to seafarers “welcome home” or “welcome here” at Christmas.

Further, the *Karavaki* during Christmas time blends the two most important identity-creating symbolic universes of Greece: (1) the strenuous boat journey of *The Odyssey*, which almost has the status of being a national epos; and (2) the Bible, whose Gospels gave rise to the tradition of celebrating Christ’s birth.

Against the background of these motifs and symbolic universes, the steel wire boat skeleton on Omonia Square during Christmas 2015–2016 was both a blending and a “mutation” of sorts. It was highly evocative of Greek imagination and tradition, but the most striking aspect of it was supplied by those who had immediately adopted it as *their* common symbol and gathering place: namely, the boat refugees. As mentioned, Omonia was their hangout spot since it was not far from the train station, where large groups of refugees kept arriving but were unable to travel on to other destinations because of international fence-building and Greece’s isolation from mainland Europe. Anyway, every time I was there for as long as the boat was standing, it was at all times surrounded by stranded refugees passing the time and seeking company with each other. Had they ever heard of *The Odyssey*? Did they know of Odysseus, who floated like a boat refugee at sea for many years, losing most of his peers? Did they compare themselves with Odysseus, who was trapped on one island after another and seemingly never being able to reach “home”—and when he did, only to find a place that had been transformed into something different?

Let me extract some points from this “reading” of the Christmas boat on Omonia square that may have some bearing on the future of biblical studies:

- (1) Blending, comparison, and interaction between different canonised texts on the level of motifs—and the mutations these cultural processes engender—happens, and will happen more and more. Recipients without previous knowledge of the texts in question recognise similar motifs across different texts and within a variety of cultural settings. For biblical scholarship, this will mean that there will have to be more comparative study of sacred and other canonised texts, and more study of how the multivalence of the biblical texts can enable them to speak with or against other privileged texts, and for a variety of purposes.
- (2) If there will be more comparative study of the Bible and other sacred/canonised texts, biblical scholars will need to learn more about other sacred/canonised texts, and issues of canonicity and world literature more

- in general.²⁰ The canon most appropriate to engage alongside the Bible will necessarily have to vary according to culture, location, and purpose. In East Asia, it may be Laozi or Zhuangzi; here in Greece, Homer or Plato.
- (3) Studying the motifs being emphasised in other canonised texts can also indicate to “users” and scholars of the Bible which motifs to pick up and analyse in greater detail. One such motif is migration.

Many of the hermeneutics that have involved, one way or other, “reading from this place” (Segovia and Tolbert [eds.] 1995a, 1995b) have been tied up with issues of identity—identities you are born with, which you can or cannot hide. They have also been tied to issues of ideology, such as feminism or Marxism, or to geographical locations, such as reading from Brazil, South Africa, China, or the United Kingdom. Reading as a refugee cuts across much of this: you can be a refugee for parts of your life but not all; your situation may remain invisible for others; and, unfortunately, you can be from anywhere in the world. “Refugee readings” sit oddly alongside other contextual readings of the Bible.

The situation in which a refugee finds him- or her-self is counterproductive to reading and reflection on canonised texts, since books and academic writing facilities are particularly hard to access during such a strenuous journey. Hence, to find written accounts of such reading and reflection is even more rare, especially in a language that I can understand.²¹ Although the ideal source for me would have been an interpretive piece written by a migrant during the period of migration and in a Western European language, my chosen source is an article in English by an American professor describing a teaching situation among refugees from the same countries as those arriving in Greece. The text was produced during the period of the Christmas boat installation at Omonia Square, the winter of 2015–2016, but the geographical location was Jordan.

Richmond Eustis, literature professor on a Fulbright scholarship to the University of Jordan in 2015, writes in “‘We’re All Refugees’: What teaching Displaced Syrians Taught Me about My Calling and My Country” (Eustis 2015)

20 See, for example, the project on canonicity mentioned in footnote 12 above; see also Allan 2016; and Stordalen 2007.

21 Siobhán McElduff thus writes regarding the reception of classical literature among non-elite groups: “[P]roblematically for studies like this, it is true that among the non-elite of the past ‘reading remains the most difficult stage to study in the circuit that books follow’” (McElduff 2008: 181, partly citing Darnton 1990: 122).

that he understood the *Odyssey* properly only after having taught it to a class of Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian refugees.

Like Knausgård the author found the particularities of biblical landscapes and cultures so alienating that he relocated the creation and Noah stories in his more familiar Norway as a way around the problem, Eustis the professor had, *before he went to Jordan*, seen his task in the American classroom as one of transmitting exactly what he too saw as the knowledge about Mediterranean geography and culture required to get access to the meaning: for example, rocky Ithaca, the wilderness of the dark seas, the lush Ogygia—all nature being inhabited by various figures along the continuous specter of divine and human. He also saw the *Odyssey* as a story about growing up, and about love that conquers everything. Then he says:

But that's not how my students in Jordan read it at all. Many of them are Syrian, or Iraqi, or Palestinian refugees. In their written responses to the first three books, much of the class wrote some variation of: "We know this story. We know what it is to be unable to go home, to show up with nothing at the door of strangers and hope they greet us with kindness instead of anger. We know what it's like to wonder about the fate of family members, caught up in wars that seem to go on forever, and to hope that one day we will see them again."

For them, *The Odyssey* was not just a story. Eustis notes that many of them had been washed up on foreign shores just like Odysseus. Like him, they were men of military age, and, like him, many were schemers in order to survive. Also, Odysseus had, in Eustis's words, "a bloodbath behind him and the destruction of a great city at least partially to his credit."

Eustis then goes on to discuss the students' recognition of the principle of *xenos*: From the outset, the Greek word *xenos* (ξένος) means "foreigner/stranger," "visitor/tourist," or "guest." The fact that the language uses the same term for three conceptual areas that are well distinguished in English (and Norwegian) also says something about traditional cultural values. Although Eustis suggests that *The Odyssey* is in many ways a survey of the traditional Greek practice of *xenia* (ξενία or "hospitality"), he continues to use the Greek term in his Jordanian context because, beyond the linguistic form in *The Odyssey*, the motif is well-known even to Syrians and Iraqis finding themselves in Jordan, so the students grasped its particulars quickly. Eustis explains, "[F]or my students, it depicts the exile's anxiety in a world in which the principle of *xenia* is threatened, in which the stranger's welcome is in doubt. Odysseus asks

himself many times about the inhabitants of the unknown islands.” According to Eustis, the students took:

special note of Odysseus’ plea to the Phaiákian queen Arêtê in Book VII: “[g]rant me passage to my father land. My home and friends are far. My life is pain.” For many of them the ruins of Troy are still smoldering behind them, their *oikos* in utter disarray with little hope of putting it right. And now the hope of safe haven vanishes too. There may be no solace for them across the wine-dark sea, which continues to claim victims in many of the same places it did in Homer’s time.

Could university classes in a secular university in the same region and with a similar clientele have analysed the Bible along parallel lines? Perhaps they already have, and that it was just my idea of what I should be looking for—and in which language—that prevented me from locating, in the same region, similar analyses on Syrian refugees reading, for example, of the Abraham story or of the story of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fleeing to Egypt? I am not sure.

On the one hand, speaking against the assumption that similar written accounts of teaching the Bible as ancient migrant literature exist, just hidden from a Western Anglophone research context, is the fact that biblical stories are also part of the generative matrix of the conflicts that lead people in this region to flee. That the Bible could be characterised as both migrant literature and divisive and conflict-escalating literature is down to its multivalence as a canonised and frequently recycled text. But here I want to emphasise how frequently the biblical books touch on the topic of migration. You have Moses leading his people out of Egypt (Exod. 12:50, cf. the Deuteronomic Creed in Deut. 26:5–9 and the promise in Deut. 6:10–12), or Abraham who has to leave his home town and traverse the desert and pimp his wife on the way (Gen. 12:10–20; 23:1–4). In addition, we find Jesus’s flight to Egypt (Matt. 2:13–14); there are also Paul’s missionary journeys, which more often than not turned violent and dangerous—such as the story of Paul’s shipwreck (Acts 27:39–44)—as so many others have experienced in the Mediterranean then and now. In this migrant literature, some just relocate or wander about, others are forced to flee. These are highly different situations, not immediately evident perhaps for the person who meets the stranger. Some of the biblical stories, unfortunately, also contain revenge motifs on a level not seen in *The Odyssey*, so following Eustis’s example to study biblical stories in a similar way in a university classroom full of refugees may simply be too difficult. Readings today that only emphasise Abraham’s “right” to the new land, however, will be directly at odds

with readings that highlight the vulnerability in the refugee situation. Biblical scholars will have to negotiate between these two positions in the classroom and in their writing. In my view, although this is challenging, it is not a reason for not studying how these motifs are dealt with in multifaceted ways in our shared textual and cultural heritage.

So, on the other hand, I do expect in the years to come that we will re-discover how many others of our culture's most canonised texts also contain the motifs of migrates, refugees, fleeing, and crossing of borders and waters in the same Mediterranean and Middle Eastern context where people are drowning today. Many of them further present these traumatic flights or flight routes as "foundational" for something new, better, and more important; for instance, new religion (Abraham and Jesus) or new wealth (Noah, Odysseus) emerge as results. In a new period of migration today, in which more people than ever find themselves away from a homeland against their own will, one may even speculate whether the motif of migration-cum-new-beginning in canonised literatures might be one of the contributing factors why these texts and stories became so popular as to attain canonical status in the first place. For someone lost at sea or in the desert, fleeing a Sodom or a Pharaoh or a Herod, there is much consolation and hope in stories where tribulations work out for the better. Also, for an increasing population of our street neighbours, these texts assert that nomadic lives are normal. Through their motifs, these texts provide powerful resources to handle the insecurities of departure and reception (*ξενία/xenia*) in the new location.

Finally, situationally conditioned comparative readings of canons and motifs also bring out differences and important nuances. There are important differences between the Homeric and the biblical way of exploring the refugee/migrant motif. For example, Odysseus has a notion of permanent dwelling, a "home," that is missing in the literature about a nomadic Abraham. Odysseus's dream is that everything should become like before. The last thing we hear from Paul is his strong desire to go to Spain (Rom. 15:22–24), which was at the time akin to somewhere at the edge of the world, rather than to go back home. In the Abraham story, the "home" for this nomad is the social unit of family, while the exact location of where the tent is placed at any time is less important. Odysseus kills those who have taken his house, while Abraham has God clear new land for him.

Conclusion

Biblical studies as a discipline is dependent on a public interest in the Bible. In this essay I have tried to exemplify how biblical studies could nourish and

develop greater public interest in the years to come. As less and less public knowledge about the Bible can be presupposed, what remains is not an interest in “what the Bible really says about” this and that, but in “what might be in it for me.” My hunch is that what is in the Bible for a broader, multireligious, and biblically illiterate public is some still familiar motifs that are effective across times and cultures, but that have been expressed and preserved in a privileged form in the biblical texts. These motifs will have everything to gain from comparative canonical studies, in addition to the fact that studies of the Bible as world literature will contribute to a new realization that Christianity is a minority religion in a multifaith world.

Texts that are read and re-read acquire an additional function over time as mirrors for the time and culture in which they have been read. Having discussed the biblical scholarship that grew out of a historicist episteme with its search for historical accuracy²² and then the Bible as a container of motifs that inspire great literature (Knausgård) and have the potential of capturing new audiences (Eustis in Jordan), I ended up at my current “home” in Greece, one of the two countries in Europe (Italy being the other) that still receives refugees while the richer countries further north are discussing, washing their hands, closing their borders, and trying to clog as many gaps in the wall as possible.

The motifs of flight and migration have perhaps been harder to grasp and see through those periods of European history when most people have been more permanently based in a place, in a household, or a house. Cultures that have remained nomadic, or peoples who are forced to migrate at regular intervals, have perhaps seen these biblical motifs more easily and found solace in them.

Many new ways of reading the Bible have taken different identity positionalities and explored the texts with theories and methods appropriate to

22 I use the term “episteme” in its Foucauldian sense, that is, as a system of conceptual possibility, of thought and knowledge that determines the boundaries of truth and thought in a given place and period (alternatively labeled “discursive formation”). It is governed by rules on a different level than logic, language, and consciousness of the individual. Researching the consecutive chain of “epistemes” will produce what Foucault called an “archaeological” approach to the history of thought (Foucault 1966). Writing meta-critically about epistemes, Foucault writes himself into the academic field of *epistemology*, which analyses epistemes and the production and conceptions of knowledge. Researching canonised texts across consecutive epistemes is particularly interesting, as this can reveal how the interplay between an episteme and the text produces different “truths” in different time periods. In terms of “fuel” or dynamics driving research (which has been one of the scarlet threads of this essay), I am suggesting that one can still have related research going on when the episteme changes, but the drive underpinning the research will have disappeared or changed.

a particular position: women-centered readings have been enhanced by feminist theories and methods; readings exploring sex or sexuality in the Bible have been explored by the use of queer and other theories of sexuality; critical theories of race and ethnicity have been deployed, alongside theories of intersectionality, for similar but distinct purposes. These methods and theories may have also spurred non-academic readers on to “read against the grain” and see other possibilities in the texts, including what the texts might have meant to groups other than the addressee(s) and intended readers. But do these “other” readers need the help of academics? Obviously not. There were, for example, women and slaves and refugees reading the Bible critically long before the theoretisation of situated readings (e.g., Fell 1989; Truth 1851). However, in my opinion there is still the job of biblical scholars to provide non-academic readers with fruitful theoretical, material, and hermeneutical resources, but not to “produce” readings that pretend to speak, like a colonizing power, on their behalf and thereby rendering them speechless yet again. Still, there are important conversations to be had between scholars, who analyse and critically discuss readings, and novelists, artists, or the general public to explore and develop further how people have made sense of the Bible and found inspiration in its motifs. These motifs speak and can be enabling, even to people who have never read the Bible before. I have attempted to illuminate some of these processes here. Biblical scholars need to pay more attention to how reading subjects read, including the hitherto biblically illiterate.

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African Biblical Scholarship as Post-Colonial, Tri-Polar, and a Site-of-Struggle

Gerald O. West

African biblical scholarship is historically post-colonial, theoretically tri-polar, and ideologically a site-of-struggle. In this essay, I reflect on nearly 90 years of African biblical scholarship using these three distinctive features, discerning within each how African futures might reconfigure them.

The scope of this essay is limited to continental African biblical scholarship,¹ what Andrew Mbuvi in a recent “mapping” (to use a European metaphor) or “tracking” (to use an African metaphor) calls “African Biblical Studies (ABS)” (Mbuvi 2017: 149), boldly giving our scholarship an upper-case designation. My essay does, though, recognise kindred connections with African diasporic (Yorke 2000), Africana (Page [ed.] 2010), and other African-related biblical scholarship (Ukpong [ed.] 2002), as well as comradely connections with various forms of “liberation” biblical scholarship (Vaage [ed.] 1997; Bailey, Liew, and Segovia [eds.] 2009; West 2013). The decisive dimension in my essay is the African context: “there is a concern to make African peoples, identified social-culturally as groups and defined in terms of their common identities and concrete historical social life situations, the *subject* of interpretation of the Bible” (Ukpong 2002: 22).

Mbuvi’s article, “African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline,” is the most recent in a line of attempts by various African scholars to map or track our sub-discipline (Mbuvi 2017). While we recognise that the parameters of “biblical studies” have been established by the Euro-American guild, we regularly document the “distinctive interpretive approaches” that characterise African biblical scholarship (Mbuvi 2017: 168). We have done this differently, though as I will argue in this essay using the concepts indicated in my title, there are familial resemblances across our accounts. Alongside bibliographic cataloguing of African biblical scholarship (Holter 1996, 2002;

1 This follows the tradition reflected in the following edited collections: West and Dube (eds.) 1996; Kinoti and Waliggo (eds.) 1997; Getui, Holter, and Zinkuratiire (eds.) 1999; West and Dube (eds.) 2000; Dube (ed.) 2001; Getui, Maluleke, and Ukpong (eds.) 2001; Loba-Mkole and Wendland (eds.) 2005; Holter (ed.) 2006; Mukeng, Loba-Mkole, and Bessong (eds.) 2007; Holter (ed.) 2008; de Wit and West (eds.) 2008; Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango (eds.) 2012; Reinhartz 2015.

LeMarquand 2000), we have used an array of conceptual frames to reflect on our work, as each of the essays gathered in the edited volumes, monographs, journal articles, chapters in books, handbooks, encyclopaedia, and commentaries² demonstrate.

In addition to “Africa”-wide analyses (Ntrel 1990; Gifford 2008; Dube 2013; West 2015a), there are also regional reflections, both at particular historical moments (Deist 1991; le Roux 1993; Punt 2003; Bosman 2015; Chitando 2016) and across decades (Ukpong 2000a), and even centuries (Yamauchi 2004; West 2015b, 2016d), as well as African contextual-thematic engagements, including Africans in the Bible (Adamo 1998; Holter 2000a), African Independent Churches (Nthamburi and Waruta 1997; Ndung’u 2000; Sithole 2011), inter-faith/religion collaboration (Adelowo 1986; West and Sitoto 2005), gender (Okure 1993; Oduyoye 1995; Abogunrin et al. [eds.] 2003), HIV (Dube and Kanyoro [eds.] 2004; Nadar 2006a; Masenya 2006), sexuality (Gunda 2010; Punt 2014; Kuloba 2016; West 2016b; West, van der Walt, and Kaoma 2016), race (Mosala 1996; West 2000, 2012; Masenya 2002; Maluleke and Nadar 2004; Snyman 2008), ethnicity (Nyirimana 2011), reconstruction (Speckman 2007; Farisani 2012; Wafawanaka 2012a), land (Mafico 2012; Wafawanaka 2012b), postwar (Ngwa 2015), translation (Yorke and Renju [eds.] 2004; Loba-Mkole and Wendland [eds.] 2005; Yorke 2012; Sanneh 2015), the African public realm (Gifford 2003; Gunda and Kügler [eds.] 2012; Gunda 2015; West 2010a), and the relationship between the African academy and local African communities (West 1991, 2011a; Ukpong 2000b; Nadar 2012). African theologians too have reflected on African biblical scholarship (Schaaf 1994; Maluleke 2000a); indeed, African biblical scholarship’s “home” has been within African Religion (Dickson 1972; Mbiti 1994), African theologies, and African Christianities (Mbiti 1977, 1986; Appiah-Kobi and Torres 1983; Parrat 1984; West 2015a, 2016c).

This brief overview of some of the ways in which African biblical scholarship has been considered and, more importantly, considered itself (for the vast bulk of citations are African authored) does not do justice to the richly textured reality that is African biblical scholarship. Each of the citations (above and below) is a thread to a fuller tapestry, as I have deliberately selected citations that intersect with other related African contributions. What follows is not a summary of this terrain, but my own (collaborative) reflections on how

2 There have been numerous attempts to produce sets of African commentaries, but these remain incomplete. The single volume commentary (Adeyemo [ed.] 2006) is, in my view, more a reflection of African “evangelical-ness” than “African-ness”; see also Wafula 2012. Other commentaries have included specifically “African” contributions (e.g., Patte [ed.] 2004; Page [ed.] 2010).

we might understand our “project” looking to the past, present, and future. I insert the adjective “collaborative” because what I offer here by way of analysis is the product of decades of conversation and work with other African biblical scholars. It has been important for me as a white South African (African) to locate myself and so my work within African frames, particularly the frames of South African black theology and South African contextual theology (West 2006, 2012).

What follows, then, reflects what I consider, at the present moment, to be significant distinctive features of African biblical scholarship, constructed respectfully on the work of those generations of African theologians and biblical scholars who have preceded us, and then going on to discern the trajectories that are being taken up by a post-liberation (for after 1994 all of Africa is liberated) generation of African biblical scholars.

Distinctive Features

As I said in my first sentence, African biblical scholarship is historically post-colonial, theoretically tri-polar, and ideologically a site-of-struggle. These formulations are particularly South African, but have found resonance among the three generations of African biblical scholars that I envisage as my implied collaborators, “in-corporating” the generation before mine, my generation, and the generation arising. *Mayibuye iAfrica!* Let African return/arise! My fist is raised in solidarity with South African black consciousness (Magaziner 2010), as I utter/write this liberation slogan to invoke a little militancy in what is an academic essay. This is not inappropriate, for African biblical scholarship has a militant stance and praxis, being historically post-colonial, theoretically tri-polar, and ideologically a site-of-struggle.

Post-colonial

Justin Ukpong, an ancestor of African biblical scholarship, provided us with the first conceptual periodisation of Africa biblical scholarship. Though recognising the Bible’s long formation within Africa and reception by Africans, Ukpong locates a recognisably African form of biblical scholarship in the 1930s (Ukpong 2000a: 12). He goes on “to divide the development of biblical interpretation in Africa into three phases”: (1) a “reactive and apologetic” phase (1930s–70s) “focussed on legitimizing African religion and culture”; (2) a “reactive-proactive” phase (1970s–90s), in which the African context

becomes a “resource for biblical interpretation”; and (3) a “proactive” phase (1990s), where the African context is the “subject of biblical interpretation” and “the ordinary reader” is recognised as part of African biblical scholarship (Ukpong 2000a: 12).³

Ukpong makes it clear that this periodisation is heuristic and that it “is important to note that the seeds of one phase are sown in the previous phase, and the emergence of a new phase does not mean the disappearance of the former” (Ukpong 2000a: 12). What is clear from Ukpong’s periodised analysis is that African biblical scholarship is post-colonial in its orientation both in looking backwards and forwards, and that time is entangled. The “time of African existence,” argues Achille Mbembe, can be characterised as “the *time of entanglement*,” for “this time of African existence is neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within a society. This time is not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones” (Mbembe 2001: 16).

Entangled time is evident everywhere within African existence, including biblical interpretation. Though organic to Mediterranean North Africa, the Bible for much of Sub-Saharan Africa was part of the European imperial project of resource extraction. The Bible circumnavigated the African coastline from Europe to “the East,” steadily settling along the periphery of the African continent as the desire for resources escalated. And when colonial forces moved into the African “interior,” missionaries most often moved with them. From the late 1400s to the present, European colonial and neo-colonial economies of extraction have shaped what we call “Africa,” and the Bible is implicated in this long history (West 2016d: 14–18). In my own work on the Bible’s presence in Southern Africa, I have shown how the Bible is entangled in interlocking “periods” of African time, including indigenous time, indigenous pre-colonial time, colonial neo-indigenous time, and post-colonial/neo-colonial time.

In Southern Africa, for example, the Bible “comforted”⁴ the Dutch settlers of the *De Vereenichde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, or the Dutch East India Company) who established a refreshment station at the Cape, inexorably encroaching on and seizing African land and cattle (West 2016d: 19–84). As Dutch settler-colonialism took hold of the Cape from 1652–1794, the Bible baptised, married, buried, and generated the myths that sustained European conquest

3 In a later article, Ukpong returns to elaborate on some of the detail of his analysis and extends his reflections into the new millennium; see Ukpong 2001.

4 One of the tasks of the *sieketrooster* (“sick-comforter”), assigned to most VOC ships, was to be responsible for the public reading of the Bible; see West 2016d: 44–48; Claasen 1977: 31–32.

(Sundkler and Steed 2000: 328–330). Another strand of empire became entangled with Dutch colonialism in 1795 when the British took control of the Cape, with the Bible once again playing a settler-colonial role, first in the hands of British military and colonial chaplains (West 2010b), and then in the hands of the Nonconformist London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries (Sundkler and Steed 2000: 328–39; West 2016d: 85–231).

While the Bible was used by the VOC, the early Dutch “free *burghers*” (“settlers”), and the British military-colonial and ecclesiastical forces primarily for the “internal” maintenance of their colonists on the continental boundary, the LMS forged into the African interior in the quest for African souls. Though there was always some entanglement between the Bible and indigenous Africans on the colonial coastal periphery (West 2016d: 76–80), the LMS missionaries deliberately targeted the Africans of the interior with “the blessed message of Salvation.”⁵ LMS missionaries sought to entangle Africans in the biblical message directly. And though they hoped their proclamation of the biblical message would find receptive souls (West 2016d: 141), the translation of the biblical message was their ultimate hope in the salvation of the Africans (Campbell 1815: 209; West 2016d: 122).

Proclaiming the message of the Bible, as conceived by the LMS missionaries in the Southern African interior, was predicated on a translated Bible. So, entangled with the missionary oral proclamation was a protracted process of producing a translated text. In the Southern African interior, this task was undertaken by the LMS missionary Robert Moffat. Moffat is remembered as the translator of the first Bible in a Southern African indigenous language (Lubbe 2009). However, what is not remembered is that Moffat’s translation of the Bible was preceded by translation of various catechetical materials (West 2016d: 167–221). Indeed, Moffat’s process of translation is an extended form of catechesis: Moffat is translating “the” biblical message, as he understands it, rather than translating the Bible (West 2016d: 201–221). The translation of the Bible is a by-product of the intention to translate “the gospel” message.

Moffat seeks to integrate the indigenous Africans of the Southern African interior into the entanglements of his European time (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 234–35). But the Bible, once translated by Moffat—however ideological and theological his translation process was—offers indigenous Africans another, entangled, trajectory. As Mbembe reminds us, this is the paradoxical nature of entangled time: that historical present, the present of the Africans in the interior engaging for the first time with the biblical text in their own language, “is precisely that moment when different forms of absence become

5 These are the words of the missionary Robert Hamilton, cited in West 2016d: 124.

mixed together: absence of those presences that are no longer so and that one remembers (the past), and absence of those others that are yet to come and are anticipated (the future)" (Mbembe 2001: 16).

Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako reflect extensively on these entangled and interlocking dimensions of vernacular African translation (West 2016d: 238–43). Because missionaries like Moffat, the translator of the first full Bible into a Southern African language, believed that "the simple reading and study of the Bible alone will convert the world" and that the task of the missionary therefore was "to gain for it [the Bible] admission and attention, and then let it speak for itself" (Moffat 1842: 618), the missionary's "subordinate" position was "necessary and inevitable," says Sanneh (Sanneh 1989: 162). While the missionary controlled the Bible through oral proclamation, they occupied the dominant position; however, once the Bible was translated, African agency (via African literacy) asserted itself, pushing the missionary into the subordinate position, enabling yet another entangled trajectory. What the missionaries had denigrated in African religion and culture was, Bediako argues, now affirmed (and so recovered) by the resonances between the biblical "primal" world-view and the African primal world-view (Bediako 1995: 91–108). The present of the translated Bible re-membered the African past. And the present of the translated Bible also imagined an African future not anticipated by the missionaries. Echoing Mbembe, Sanneh writes, "We may characterize the ... [entangled] interrelationship between missionaries and Africans as reciprocity." By translating the Bible into African languages, continues Sanneh, missionaries

paid huge "vernacular" compliments to Africans, enabling many peoples to acquire pride and dignity about themselves in the modern world, and thus opening up the whole social system to equal access. For their part Africans returned the compliment by coupling a faith forged in the Scriptures with a commitment to social and political issues. Missionaries as vernacular agents thus helped Africans to become modernizing agents.

SANNEH 1989: 172–73; CF. SANNEH 2015: 98, 111

John and Jean Comaroff make a similar, but more nuanced, argument. In their analysis of the entangled "dialectics of modernity" in South Africa, colonialism "is always to be understood, *at once*, as economic and cultural, political and symbolic, general and particular." "Indeed," they go on immediately to argue, "colonialism was intrinsic to the rise of modernity in Europe, itself a historical movement whose universalizing ethos was indissolubly material and moral, secular and spiritual" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 409). And with particular reference to industrial capitalism in South Africa, they argue, "Without the

civilizing mission, it would not have existed in the way we know it; just as the mission, and the humane imperialism that propelled it, could not have taken the shape it did without the rise of [European] industrial capitalism in its modern, bourgeois form" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 409).

Echoing both Mbembe and Sanneh, "in treating the connections between the Protestant mission and colonial capitalism—as in dealing with the impact on each other of Africa and Europe," the Comaroffs "stress the analytic salience of dialectical processes, processes of reciprocal determination" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 409). Colonialism and post-colonialism are inherently entangled, and the Bible is a significant factor in their entanglement. Indeed, in the case of South Africa's "colonialism of a special type" (Hart 2013: 175; West 2016d: 458–59), the racial capitalism of apartheid (Terreblanche 2002: 422–23) was built on biblical foundations (Vosloo 2015), and so was anti-apartheid resistance.

As this particular Southern African example demonstrates, African biblical scholarship is intrinsically post-colonial, because the Bible was brought to Africa (1415–1787 and 1787–1919) as part of the missionary-colonial enterprise (West 2016d: 14–18). African biblical scholars from around the African continent do their biblical scholarship within similar but, more importantly, particular time-contextual entanglements. "Post-colonial" for us refers to actual times of colonialism, for we are all post-colonies of particular kinds. Doing our biblical scholarship post-colonially is not a matter of making a scholarly choice to use a particular set of theories among others sets of available theories. Doing biblical scholarship in African post-colonies is, by definition, to do post-colonial biblical interpretation.

Furthermore, our post-colonality extends beyond the particular imperial and colonial realities of each of our post-colonies to the discipline of biblical studies itself. As Ukpogong makes clear, "Western" biblical studies was ill-equipped to serve the post-colonial needs of an emerging African biblical scholarship, so that the discipline of comparative religion became the preferred post-colonial resource for analysing the "kindred atmosphere" of the "Old Testament" and African contexts (Ukpogong 2000a: 13, citing the phrase used by Kwesi Dickson in Dickson 1973: 36). It was only later, in the post-1960s "dawn of independence" in Africa, as the date of Kwesi Dickson's article indicates, that "biblical studies" resources made their (missionary) way into the then emerging African universities (Holter 2000c: 55).⁶ Historical-critical tools

6 As Knut Holter points out, "In 1960, at the dawn of independence, Africa had only six universities, ... but throughout the 1960s and 70s the number increased rapidly. The same was the case with the number of theological seminaries" (Holter 2000c: 55; cf. Holter 2008: 92–99).

proved useful to “studies comparing religion and socio-cultural parallels between Africa and the Old Testament” (Holter 2000c: 55). Biblical studies as an academic discipline is itself a post-colonial or, perhaps more accurately, a neo-colonial import into Africa from Euro-American contexts (Mbuvi 2017: 153). Potentially useful as biblical studies tools are for what needs to be done with the Bible in Africa, African biblical scholarship regularly reflects on their post-colonial appropriateness (Ukpong 1995, 1999; Holter 2002: 6–7).

As has become evident, when I use the term “post-colonial” I prefer the hyphen. The presence of the hyphen is a reminder of Africa’s entangled time, allowing for a pause between terms and historical moments. By “post-colonial,” I also mean something more local and particular than the more familiar Euro-American commodified forms of “post-colonial theory” have come to connote (Huggan 1997). Before post-colonial theory travelled from its subaltern sites of actual colonial struggle to the metropolises of Euro-America (Boer 1998; West 2009), African biblical scholarship (and related analytical discourses) were “post-colonial.” The language used at the time was “inculturation,” but the import was “post-colonial.” The culture and/as religion of Africans that was denigrated and partially destroyed by the colonial-missionary enterprise was “revitalised” (Sanneh 1989: 53) by African biblical interpretation. It is important, therefore, that whenever we read of African inculturation interpretation, we recognise that we are encountering a post-colonial orientation. Postcolonial interpretation is not a technique, a “method” to be applied to the biblical text. For those us who inhabit a post-colony, post-colonial interpretation is a way of life before it is an interpretive tool. Post-colonial interpretation is a way of being (African).

Tri-polar

African inculturation biblical interpretation, as the first phase of African post-colonial biblical interpretation, lays the “comparative” groundwork that characterises most African biblical scholarship. While most models of African biblical hermeneutics tend to portray a bi-polar approach—referring, for example, to “the comparative method” (Anum 2000: 468; Ukpong 2000a: 12; Holter 2002: 88–89), in which African context and biblical text interpret each other—it would be more accurate to describe African biblical hermeneutics as tri-polar.

Implicit in bi-polar-like formulations are aspects of a third pole mediating between the African context and the biblical text: namely, the pole of appropriation. Knut Holter, for example, refers to the ways in which biblical text

and African context “illuminate one another” (Holter 2002: 88), and Ukpong, a key commentator on the comparative method, refers overtly to the goal of comparative interpretation as “the actualization of the theological meaning of the text in today’s context so as to forge integration between faith and life, and engender commitment to personal and societal transformation” (Ukpong 2000a: 24). What connects or entangles text and context, then, is a form of dialogical appropriation that has a theological and a praxiological dimension (Draper 2015). This ideo-theological third pole can take various forms, resulting in at least six intersecting yet different emphases in African biblical interpretation: inculturation, liberation, feminist, psychological, postcolonial, and queer biblical hermeneutics. Andrew Mbuvi offers a partially overlapping set of ideo-theological orientations, but includes an emphasis on reconstruction and democratisation hermeneutics (Mbuvi 2017: 163).

The third pole offers an important analytical guide to the range of emphases in African biblical hermeneutics. The other two poles, the biblical text and the African context, are no less important, but an examination of the third pole clarifies *how* these two fundamental poles are brought into dialogue. That there is engagement between biblical text and African context is fundamental to African biblical scholarship. While Euro-American forms of biblical interpretation have been reluctant, until recently (cf. Segovia and Tolbert [eds.] 1995a, 1995b), to acknowledge that text and context are always, at least implicitly, in conversation, the dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics. This is readily apparent from even a cursory survey of African biblical scholarship. Interpreting the biblical text is never, in African biblical hermeneutics, an end in itself. Biblical interpretation is always about changing the African context. This is what links ordinary African biblical interpretation and African biblical scholarship, a common commitment to interpret for contextual transformation.

The kind of contextual change and transformation envisaged in particular African contexts shapes *how* biblical text and African context are brought into dialogue. The two most established forms of appropriation in African biblical scholarship have been inculturation and liberation hermeneutics, dating back to the 1970s. In the last two decades, however, two other forms of appropriation have emerged, African feminist hermeneutics, and postcolonial hermeneutics. Most recently, in the past few years, African forms of queer hermeneutics have begun to emerge from the scholarly closet, called out by the realities of HIV and AIDS. Hovering in the background, but most closely related to African feminist work is another, though less evident, form of appropriation: psychological hermeneutics. Each of these forms of appropriation has its own particular post-colonial “ideo-theological” orientation (West 2016d: 348–62).

The historically earliest and most common African form of ideo-theological orientation is inculturation biblical hermeneutics. Like other forms of African biblical interpretation, inculturation hermeneutics takes its cue from life outside the academy, “paying attention to the African socio-cultural context and the questions that arise therefrom” (Ukpong 1995: 4). Inculturation hermeneutics, Ukpong explains, “designates an approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to make the African ... context the *subject* of interpretation”; this means that every dimension of the interpretive process is “*consciously* informed by the world-view of, and the life experience within that culture” (Ukpong 1995: 5). While Ukpong himself includes the historical, social, economic, political, and religious as interlocking dimensions of inculturation hermeneutics (Ukpong 1995: 6), the tendency of most African inculturation hermeneutics is to concentrate on the cultural and religious dimensions of African life.

Alongside, but in tension with, the post-colonial oppositional aspect of inculturation hermeneutics is another of its significant features. As Ukpong says, “The focus of [African] interpretation is on the theological meaning of the text within a contemporary context” (Ukpong 1995: 6). This formulation recognises that the Bible is a significant sacred text within African socio-cultural contexts. As Ukpong goes on to say, “This involves interactive engagement between the biblical text and a particular contemporary socio-cultural issue such that the gospel message serves as a critique of the culture, and/or the cultural perspective enlarges and enriches the understanding of the text” (Ukpong 1995: 6). Here Ukpong captures succinctly the two-way engagement between text and context. What he also recognises here is the potential for mutual transformation; the Bible may have resources, read contextually, to enable Africans to re-appraise the culture they are recovering post-colonially, and African culture may have resources to understand the Bible differently from Euro-American biblical scholarship. A “hermeneutic of trust” towards the Bible as a dialogue partner is a feature of inculturation hermeneutics, looking along a forward trajectory, even as it is entangled with a past-oriented post-colonial trajectory.

Almost all of the above features are also constitutive of liberation hermeneutics, though the mix is somewhat different. Like inculturation hermeneutics, African liberation biblical hermeneutics has its starting point with the experience of the masses. In the words of the South African biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala, the hermeneutical starting point of liberation hermeneutics is the “social and material life” of “the black struggle for liberation” (Mosala 1989: 67). However, while African liberation hermeneutics acknowledges the importance of both the spiritual and the material (Mosala 1989: 67), like

inculturation hermeneutics, the emphasis in liberation hermeneutics is on the economic and the political dimensions of African life. Race and class, not religion and culture, are the critical categories of South African black liberation hermeneutics. And while inculturation hermeneutics is quite eclectic in the kinds of sociological conceptual frameworks it draws on, liberation hermeneutics is more specific, drawing deeply on Marxist conceptual frameworks (Frostin 1988).

African liberation hermeneutics also clearly shares the post-colonial oppositional stance of inculturation hermeneutics to the missionary-colonial project, though its sociological categories of contestation are economically oriented. Its most distinctive feature, however, is that liberation hermeneutics raises questions about the Bible itself, with a clarity not found in inculturation hermeneutics. The Bible is a potential resource for liberation, but it is indelibly a source of oppression and domination, and not just in the way it has been used by the missionary-colonial project; the Bible is, in part, intrinsically oppressive (Mofokeng 1988: 34; Mosala 1989: 41). An ambiguous Bible requires, asserts African liberation hermeneutics, a hermeneutic of suspicion.

The recognition that the Bible is itself, intrinsically, a site of struggle has also had methodological consequences. The predominant interpretive methodologies used in engaging with both the African context and the biblical text in inculturation hermeneutics have been historical and sociological forms of analysis. With respect to the biblical text, historical-critical and an eclectic range of sociological methods are used. With respect to the African context, an eclectic range of religio-cultural forms of analysis within African theology and anthropology are used (Ukpong 1995, 1996). African liberation hermeneutics inherits but then rejects this eclectic assortment of socio-historical analytical resources (Mosala 1989: 43–66), arguing instead for a more structured and systemic analysis of both the biblical text (within its sites of production) and the African context, using historical-materialist categories of analysis. According to Mosala, the biblical text and African context should not only be brought into dialogue in terms of content, but they should also be brought into dialogue in terms of methodology. Both the Bible and the black experience of struggle must be analysed structurally using historical-materialist categories; in other words, African interpreters must recognise that biblical texts are rooted in the struggles of their material sites of production, just as the life of black South Africans is rooted in particular socio-historical modes of production (Mosala 1989: 31–32). Method is foregrounded lest an “unstructural understanding of the Bible may simply reinforce and confirm unstructural understanding of the present” (Mosala 1989: 32).

African feminist hermeneutics—and the designation “feminist” is problematic, with some preferring (for a brief period) to borrow the African-American term “womanist” (Nadar 2001),⁷ some adopting an African indigenous designation, such as *bosadi* (Masenya 2001), and others using the general phrase “African women’s hermeneutics” (Haddad 2000; Dube 2012)⁸—emerges from within African inculturation and African liberation hermeneutics, and so shares features with each. African feminist biblical hermeneutics has been in dialogue with both the religio-cultural emphasis of inculturation hermeneutics (Mbuwayesango 1997; Yafeh-Deigh 2012) and the racial-economic-political emphasis of liberation hermeneutics (Mncube 1984; Mosala 1984; Plaatjie 2001), though religio-cultural concerns tend to be predominant. Because of the predominance of a religio-cultural emphasis in African feminist hermeneutics, it could be argued that much of this work is really a form of feminist inculturation hermeneutics (Kanyoro 2001). However, African feminist hermeneutics usually shares the attitude of suspicion towards the biblical text of African liberation hermeneutics. Most importantly, African feminist hermeneutics, like African liberation hermeneutics, insists on a structured and systematic analysis of both the African context and the biblical text; its distinctive feature is the focus on the gendered systemic nature of patriarchy (Okure 1993).

A methodological innovation in some African feminist hermeneutics has been its use of literary exegetical modes of analysis of the biblical text. While the predominant exegetical modes of analysis of both African inculturation and liberation hermeneutics have been socio-historical, with only a few voices advocating and using literary modes of exegesis (Boesak 1984; West 1995), African feminist hermeneutics has been quite receptive to literary modes of interpretation (Nadar 2001, 2006b; Masenya 2012).

African biblical hermeneutics, whether tending towards inculturation or liberation or feminist trajectories, has always been resolutely post-colonial. So it is strange that African biblical scholarship has been slow to engage, explicitly (West 1997, 2008; Punt 2003, 2006), with the forms of post-colonial theory that have characterised Euro-American biblical hermeneutics (Sugirtharajah [ed.] 1998). Slowly but surely, however, Euro-American articulations of post-colonial theory and post-colonial biblical studies are being taken up by African biblical

7 Sarojini Nadar has since returned, quite intentionally, to the “term” feminist, see Phiri and Nadar 2006.

8 Musa Dube’s essay (Dube 2012) provides a useful historical-hermeneutical overview of post-colonial African “women’s ways of reading the Bible” in the tradition of Kimpa Vita, a colonised African Christian Congolese woman of the late 1600s.

scholarship (Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango [eds.] 2012), mediated by those Africans who have studied or work within Euro-American contexts (Dube 1997, 2000, 2006; Nzimande 2005, 2008). As with the other forms of African biblical hermeneutics, post-colonial biblical hermeneutics has its starting point in the realities of ordinary Africans, for whom the Bible has become an African book, but an African book “that will always be linked to and remembered for its role in facilitating European imperialism” (Dube 2000: 3). The complicity of the Bible with European imperialism is explicit and central to the ideo-theological orientation of African post-colonial biblical hermeneutics. What inculturation, liberation, and feminist forms of African biblical hermeneutics had not adequately addressed in sufficient detail is the question “why the biblical text, its readers, and its institutions are instruments of imperialism” (Dube 2000: 6). Post-colonial biblical hermeneutics offered African biblical scholars useful tools to engage this question overtly.

Together with African liberation and feminist hermeneutics, post-colonial hermeneutics is deeply suspicious of the Bible’s own imperial charter (Dube 2000: 10). In other words, the kinds of imperial attitudes and practices performed by missionaries and colonial forces is related to the imperial tendencies of the biblical texts themselves (Dube 2000: 15). In a typical African biblical scholarship second act, African biblical scholars have gone on to construct the necessary theory and method in order to address the related question of how post-colonial African subjects should read the texts which have been instrumental to the establishment of colonialism in their contexts (Dube 2000: 16). Post-colonial African biblical interpretation requires a re-reading for decolonisation. Making African post-colonial contexts the subject of biblical interpretation, Musa Dube argues that an African post-colonial biblical hermeneutics begins with analysing the logic of imperialism, understanding its grammar (in both biblical text and African context), and then a deconstructive re-reading (of both biblical text and African context) for decolonisation (Dube 2000: 16–21).

While the Bible can and must be read for decolonisation, it is not the only resource that Africans have access to in this task. Among the resources for reading for decolonisation are the very languages and literatures (including the oral) denigrated and supplanted by the Bible and European imperialism (Dube 2000: 49). African post-colonial hermeneutics recognises that the vast literature “born from the encounter with imperialist forces” is itself “partly shaped by the textual forms of their imperial counterparts” (Dube 2000: 50–51), but critically uses such African resources, particularly those forged in resistance to imperialism, recognising that they partake in a form of hybridity (Dube 2000: 122),

in which something new and vital is constructed from the encounter with colonialism (Sugirtharajah 2003: 126).

One of the most significant contributions of African post-colonial hermeneutics is this recognition that African post-colonial interpretation (like African post-colonial identity) is itself partially constituted by colonialism (Sugirtharajah 2001: 249). Instead of denying this by claiming an “authentic” “African” interpretation, post-colonial interpretation embraces the multiplicity of identities and differences that constitute the entangled post-colonial African context, but always with a view to harnessing these hybrid resources for decolonisation. While all forms of African biblical hermeneutics, whether inculturation, liberation, feminist, or post-colonial, are committed to identifying and recovering the African “indigenous” past, they also engage critically with the pre-colonial African heritage. African post-colonial hermeneutics is no exception, recovering but also questioning, for example, the (economic) power of pre-colonial African queens over “the general grassroots populace” (Nzimande 2008: 243). The Dutch and British imperial powers and their apartheid settler-colonial beneficiaries must be held to account for the African land they seized and the proceeds of this plunder, insists Makhosazana Nzimande. But, she continues, “[F]or black African women in post-apartheid South Africa and in related postcolonial contexts where patriarchy reigns supreme, land restitution would not be beneficial unless there is a radical change in the patriarchal family structures”, for “neo-tribal” patriarchal family structures are part of the problem (Nzimande 2008: 234).

African post-colonial hermeneutics shares much in common with the ideological orientations of liberation and feminist hermeneutics, but also shares a concern for culture-related notions of identity found in inculturation hermeneutics. Again, there is a preference for socio-historical methods of textual and contextual analysis, but these are supplemented by literary methods where African oral and literary resources are used alongside biblical texts (Dube 1996).

HIV and AIDS have wrought devastation across Sub-Saharan Africa, infecting millions and affecting millions more (Dube and Maluleke 2001; Barnett and Whiteside 2002; Dube and Kanyoro [eds.] 2004). But the advent of HIV and AIDS has also opened otherwise taboo space to intersect religion and sexuality (West 2011b, 2016b). Euro-American strands of queer theory and queer biblical hermeneutics have added their resources to African biblical scholarship (Punt 2011; West, van der Walt, and Kaoma 2016), and though located largely within Southern African biblical scholarship (Gunda 2010; Kuloba 2016; West 2016e), African queer hermeneutics has

added its intersecting voice to Africa's other ideo-theological hermeneutical orientations.

Though not as prominent as its sister ideo-theological hermeneutical orientations, psychological biblical hermeneutics offers another potential African post-colonial biblical hermeneutical trajectory, particularly as trauma studies begin to intersect with biblical scholarship (Boase and Frechette [eds.] 2016; Claasens 2016; West 2016a). There has been steady African work in the field of psychological readings of the Bible (Efthimiadis-Keith 2014, 2015), and African contexts summon this work to become more engaged with the many sites of African trauma. Crossing the psychological boundary between the personal and communal is one of the challenges African contexts pose to psychological biblical hermeneutics (Denis [ed.] 2005; Denis, Houser, and Ntsimane [eds.] 2011). Intersecting psychological analysis with economic analysis is another significant African imperative (cf. Liew and Runions [eds.] 2016).

Site-of-Struggle

In Africa's long and deeply ambiguous engagement with the missionary-colonial brought Bible (West 2016d), the predominant tendency among African biblical scholars has been to work with the Bible with a "hermeneutic of trust," using inculturation theory to re-appropriate the Bible over against missionary-colonial deprecations of African religion and/as culture. Biblical interpretation has been readily recognised as a site-of-struggle; indeed, this recognition is the primary impetus for African biblical scholarship, refusing to allow the missionaries or Euro-American biblical scholars to have the final word. African biblical scholarship contends for interpretations in which African contexts are the subject of interpretation.

While biblical interpretation has always been a site-of-struggle, African biblical scholars have been less clear about the Bible itself—intrinsically and inherently—as a site-of-struggle. But Itumeleng Mosala is adamant that "the texts of the Bible are sites of struggle" (Mosala 1989: 185), and that any appropriation must foreground this reality of struggle. Unless the Bible is recognised and re-read as itself, intrinsically and inherently, a site of struggle, there is always the risk that the oppressor's form of the text, the final form, will have the final word (Mosala 1989: 28; West 2017).

The biblical text is only of use to Mosala because (1) in the words of his colleague and fellow Black theologian, Takatso Mofokeng, "the Christian religion and the Bible will continue for an undeterminable period of time to be the haven of the Black masses par excellence" (Mofokeng 1988: 40), and

(2) historical-materialist analysis of the biblical text's contending ideological voices offers potential kindred sites of struggle for black working-class Christians, "drawing from their history of struggle," including their struggles against both African precapitalist and later white settler capitalist modes of production (Mosala 1989: 183),⁹ to "make hermeneutical connections with similar agendas in the contemporary setting" (Mosala 1989: 185).¹⁰ But, Mosala is quick to add, even "[w]ith the [ideological] agenda of the text laid bare," "[t]he usefulness or otherwise of the agenda of the text cannot be decided a priori. It has to be tested on the basis of the demands and experience of the struggle of black working-class people" (Mosala 1989: 185). Mosala grounds his biblical hermeneutics in the actual struggles of contemporary working-class Africans. Real struggle, whether in the past, present, or future, is the terrain for the doing of African biblical interpretation.

If contemporary working-class Africans do, through their struggle-trained eyes (Mosala 1986: 196), "discover kin struggles in biblical communities," then there is the potential, argues Mosala, that "[t]hese biblical struggles ... serve as a source of inspiration for [their] contemporary struggles, and as a warning against their co-optation" (Mosala 1989: 188). The enduring problem, according to Mosala, is that the final form of the Bible we have and use is a form shaped by the dominant classes of particular historical periods in the Bible's formation. Dominant classes have through the redactional processes of the Bible's composition co-opted the ideological perspectives of marginalised social sectors. Ideological redactional co-optation of working-class struggles is a distinctive feature of the final form of the biblical text, and so, often, "[t]he category of the 'black struggle' as a hermeneutical factor draws its poetry from a future that in this struggle's collision with ... [much of the biblical text as we have it] is experienced as an 'absence'" (Mosala 1989: 188). By focussing on the final form of the biblical text, we find only the absence of marginalised voices. But this absence is partially present because redactional processes do not entirely eradicate the voices they co-opt. Remnants or fragments of marginalised voices remain. The poetry that Mosala refers to is the capacity of future contexts of struggle, such as the South African struggle, to provide avenues of access to the fragmentary presence of ideologically co-opted marginalised social sectors.

So, while ancient biblical "class" struggles may have been elided or co-opted by dominating ideological forces and their redactions, contemporary black working-class struggles are able to activate this ideologically "faithful"

9 It is important to note that Mosala does not see the indigenous African pre-colonial past as a struggle-free period. "Class" struggle goes all the way back.

10 This long complex sentence is an attempt to convey the "logic" of Mosala's work.

remnant. This is why contemporary struggles are the starting point of a black theology of liberation: “the poor and exploited [in their struggle] must liberate the Bible so that the Bible [which remains a significant “accessible ideological silo or storeroom” for them (Mofokeng 1988: 40)] may liberate them” (Mosala 1989: 193). So it is only by recognising and appropriating the Bible as itself a site of struggle that the Bible has the potential to become “a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people” (Mofokeng 1988: 40).

Mofokeng argues that there is a long history within the church of “the weakest, neglected, poor and marginalised people” recognising “the usefulness of the Bible as a book with a message of survival, resistance and hope,” giving them “a reason for hoping for a different future and believing in their right to a decent human existence” (Mofokeng 1988: 38). What this historical legacy offers us, continues Mofokeng, is a historical praxis that is “a new kind of struggle, ... namely, the struggle for the Bible or, to be more precise, the struggle for control of the Bible” (Mofokeng 1988: 39). While Mofokeng identifies this “new kind of struggle,” Mosala offers the tools with which to analyse how the final form of the Bible has already come under the control of dominant and dominating ideological sectors as well as how to identify and recover the voices of marginalised sectors within the biblical past.¹¹

Mosala’s methodological warning about the struggles of working-class and other marginalised sectors being co-opted by dominant ideologies, a process he found in the production of biblical texts, has not been heeded. At the methodological level, Mosala’s biblical hermeneutics offered insight and access into the ideological redactional history of the Bible. His historical materialist analysis “laid bare ... the class character and ideological commitments of [a particular redactional layer of] the text” (Mosala 1989: 185), enabling contemporary working-class black South Africans to recognise four things. First, Mosala’s method offered a way of analysing both biblical text and contemporary socio-historical context. The method was useful for each of these terrains of struggle, whether the ancient sites of struggle that produced the biblical texts or the contemporary sites of struggle that generated a black working-class (Mosala 1989: 4, 192). Second, Mosala’s method offered black working-class Christians a way of connecting “kin struggles” (Mosala 1989: 188), identifying and foregrounding the economic and ideological connections between biblical text and contemporary context (Mosala 1989: 4–5). Third, Mosala’s method, by identifying the ideological and economic agenda of a particular (layer of)

11 For a detailed account of Mosala’s hermeneutical processes see Mosala 1989; West 1995: 135–46, 2016d: 328–40.

text, enabled black working-class Christians to recognise when they must interpret with the ideo-economic grain and when they must interpret against the ideo-economic grain of a particular (layer of) text (Mosala 1989: 32, 41, 123–53, 173–89). Finally, fourth, Mosala's method was meant to demonstrate that ideo-economic sectoral co-optation does take place, for it is evident in the redactional history of the Bible's formation, with dominant ideological and economic forces co-opting and displacing the ideological and economic perspective and practices of marginalised sectors. Indeed, insists Mosala, African theology in general and South African black theology and South African contextual theology in particular have succumbed to precisely this danger, the danger of collaborating with the Bible's dominant ruling class ideologies.¹² In so doing, they engage in a “useless sparring with the ghost of the oppressor, whom ... [they] have already embraced in the oppressor's most dangerous form, the [final] ideological form of the [biblical] text” (Mosala 1989: 28).

Accountable African Biblical Scholarship

South Africa has joined our African sister nation-states in ways we would not have imagined in 1994 when we celebrated our liberation. At that time, South African black theology and contextual theology had a vibrant presence, having being forged as the spiritual ideology of the liberation struggle. What *The Kairos Document* called “Prophetic Theology” was the prevalent theology, as we embraced our political and legal (and partial economic) liberation (Kairos 1985: 22 §5.2). Since then prophetic theology has slowly dissipated. Many of the prophetic theologians have gone into government and church leaders, many of whom were only ever reluctant proponents of prophetic theology, have retreated into more familiar forms of individualised moralistic maintenance theologies, what *The Kairos Document* called “Church Theology” (Kairos 1985: 8 §3). What is common to our contemporary African churches across the continent is a “domesticated Christianity”; while taking on diverse roles, the one public role such a Christianity does not conspicuously play is to provide a serious challenge to the economic and political realm (Gifford 2009: 215). This Christianity is focussed on the personal, not the

12 Mosala also includes here North American black theology, one of his primary dialogue partners. Mosala's concerns in this case are echoed and elaborated, in African American terms, by Randall Bailey; see Bailey 1998.

structural; “it is not concerned with a renewed order or any ‘new Jerusalem’” (Gifford 1998: 339).¹³

In Mosala’s terms, the Bible has been co-opted from prophetic theologians who have themselves been partially co-opted by the post-apartheid state (Leonard 2005). A failure to recognise the inherent ideologically contested nature of the Bible leads inevitably to the dominant sectors of contemporary society forming an alliance with the dominant sectors of the Bible, thereby co-opting the marginalised sectors within both the Bible and contemporary society.

Mosala is, I think, right. Mosala is implicitly imagining biblical scholars working with “the masses.” His concern is that when we are working with African communities of the poor and marginalised, we should work with the Bible as a site-of-struggle. Given the entangled history of the Bible’s presence in Southern Africa, African biblical scholarship—an heir, at once, of indigenous African pre-colonial identity, the missionary-colonial project, and post-colonial African resistance—must engage the post-colonial, in which the hyphen serves to remind us of the long, protracted time of African entanglement. Not to be overt about the post-colonial reality of the Bible’s presence in Sub-Saharan Africa would be analytically irresponsible. Not to work overtly with our local African communities to re-read the Bible for decolonisation would make us unaccountable to our African context.

Each of the elements in the tri-polar approach requires disciplinary responsibility from African biblical scholars. By being overt about these intersecting elements in our methodology, we are responsible to the interdisciplinary fields that constitute each. This is most obvious with respect to the biblical text, where African biblical scholars have a responsibility to the “biblical studies” discipline (cf. Moore and Sherwood 2011), notwithstanding the Euro-American “colonial” dimensions of this discipline. Significantly, the dominant methods of the international biblical studies guild are the same as those of most forms of African biblical scholarship. Historical and sociological methods characterise the dominant trajectories of both. It is somewhat surprising, given Africa’s oral legacy, that literary methods are not more prevalent, but this is probably because our Euro-American “masters” have disciplined us too well.

Though the Euro-American biblical studies guild frowns, publically, on ideological interpretive interests contaminating its “exegetical” work, there is a growing awareness that ideo-theological interpretive interests cannot be

13 Gifford’s argument is contested, at least in part, by a number of scholars; see Gifford 2004: 169–72; Kalu 2008: 187–205.

ignored (Rowland 2007). African biblical scholarship takes responsibility for the theological and ideological dimensions of our theoretical orientations as we construct a dialogue between biblical text and African context. Indeed, our African contexts demand this kind of accountability. So, the “ultimate” responsibility—and here the word “accountability” is more appropriate (West 1995: 83–102)—is to our African contexts. Our primary accountability is not to the biblical studies guild but to our African contexts.¹⁴

As my generation looks forward, we wonder whether this kind of contextual accountability and advocacy, which we inherited from the generation before ours, will endure as a core commitment of African biblical scholars of the next generation. Of course, contextual priority has not been a distinctive feature of each and every African biblical scholar. We have recognised, for example, that white South African biblical scholarship, with important exceptions, has tended to avoid the local African context, particularly communities of the black poor and marginalised, preferring the company of Euro-American (with an emphasis on the former) dialogue partners (Smit 1990; Draper 1991; West 1995: 48–51). This is why Madipoane Masenya can ask: “Is White South African Old Testament Scholarship African?” (Masenya 2002).

But what of the next generation of black African¹⁵ scholarship? First, the liberation-oriented social movements that mobilised post-colonial resistance and the struggle for independence that nurtured the previous two African generations are not as coherent as they were, so it is not as self-evident as it used to be that socially engaged African biblical scholars will find the nurturing and formational spaces and places that shaped the previous generations in Africa. Second, African universities, many of which were inappropriately modelled on the Euro-American model (Sherman 1990), are not as resourced as they were previously (Holter 1998, 2000b), having been decimated by Euro-American structural adjustment programmes (Sifuna 2014). African scholars have considerable difficulties, therefore, in accessing current biblical studies material. Electronic platforms, like the Society of Biblical Literature’s International Cooperation Initiative (ICI) and Academia.edu, have made a difference, but in some contexts institutional access to the internet is limited. The great libraries of Africa are now almost entirely located in South Africa. Third, African

14 See a nuanced criticism of this position in Nelson 2012: 101–107; see a response to this criticism in West 2014: 725–29.

15 I retain South Africa’s post-liberation racial nomenclature, for the same reasons that the categories apartheid constructed have been re-used after liberation for redress but extend its racialised scope, perhaps inappropriately, beyond South African boundaries.

universities have followed the Euro-American model (Vale 2013), becoming increasingly part of a corporate culture in which African intellectuals are professionalised and “captured” (Ogachi 2011). Fourth, with steadily growing numbers of Africans studying and taking up academic positions in Euro-American universities, there are signs of these scholars being coercively forced, for the sake of their careers, to follow Euro-American “scholarly” trends, requiring a bracketing of context and the local communities with whom African biblical scholars do their work. Fifth, this “northern” drift, often for economic reasons, may give the illusion that “African biblical scholarship” can be done without continental African contexts. My sense is that African biblical scholars studying and working in Euro-American institutions are resisting this impulse, refusing R. S. Sugirtharajah’s rallying cry with respect to Asian biblical interpretation: “If the 1980s was the time of the subalterns, now is the time of the diasporic intellectuals ... What diasporic hermeneutics has done is to make regional-based theologies such as African, Asian, or Latin American almost redundant” (Sugirtharajah 2006: 5, 6). Perhaps Sugirtharajah is being ironic; I hope so (West 2009).

In his analysis of “diasporic hermeneutics,” the growth of which he considers one of the significant changes “about the margins” in biblical scholarship (Sugirtharajah 2006: 3), Sugirtharajah is insightful and eloquent about the different agendas of diasporic intellectuals and those “who are physically resident in their respective homelands”:

It is clear that these discourses, the one from home and the other from abroad, are motored and motivated by different agendas. A quick scrutiny of the two discourses will reveal stark differences in their motivation and mission. The key terms for articulations emerging from home might begin with HIV/AIDS, backward classes, base communities, *burakumins*, capitalism, *dalits*, development, environment, free-trade, or the World Trade Organization. The list for the diasporic scenario might begin with alterity, border-thinking, body-politics, carnival, deconstruction, the end of history, mimicry, and so forth. Similarly, these two discourses summon and anchor their work in different families of authors and texts. The theologies at home might include Ambedkar, Banerjea, Chenchiah, Gandhi, Gutiérrez, Garvey, Mbiti, Mosala, Samartha, Song, Kitamori, and Koyama. Diasporic discourse might begin with Althusser, Anzaldúa, Bhaktin, Bhabha, Cabral, Derrida, Said, and Žižek. I may have overstressed the differences. They are, nevertheless, palpable: one is located firmly in the cultural, pastoral, and political milieu of the people and explores the social

conditions affecting them, whereas the other is desperately seeking a home and acceptability in the academy, enamoured of and entrapped by its theoretical sophistry and methodological procedures.

SUGIRTHARAJAH 2006: 6

This is aptly put. And while Sugirtharajah, like so many in the Euro-American guild, has reservations about biblical scholars locating their work among the Bible reading/hearing/using communities of their contexts,¹⁶ the first four essays in the third edition of his *Voices from the Margin* explicitly affirm local contextual accountability, one from a Latin American female scholar (Tamez 2006), one from an African American female scholar (Weems 2006), one from a Latin American male scholar (Míguez-Bonino 2006), and one from an African male scholar (Ukpong 2006). Renita Weems reflects this local contextual accountability with eloquent precision and honesty:

Thinking about my generation of African American female scholars working as academics in the field of religion, I can say that most of us do not view our work as accountable to the Academy, even though we are involved in the discourse of the Academy and are dependent upon the Academy for a large part of our living. But we reserve the right to make our work accountable ultimately to grass-roots African American women, women struggling for voice and representation in institutional circles, ecclesial circles especially.

WEEMS 2006: 29–30; CF. WEEMS 1996

Weems is unembarrassed by her scholarly accountability to grass-roots women of faith. Neither is Musa Dube, though she puts her position of accountability more politically: “Given the historical link of the Bible with colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa and the continuing challenges confronting the continent, African biblical interpretation is at once a postcolonial practice and a quest for emancipation” (Dube 2013: 9). Here is a historically post-colonial Bible, a Bible that is located within a tri-polar theoretical frame, and a Bible that is

16 Echoing the words of the Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, we can say that while the primary interlocutor of Euro-American biblical scholarship is the educated middle-class, the primary interlocutor of biblical liberation hermeneutics is “the poor, the exploited classes, the marginalized races, all the despised cultures” (Gutiérrez 1973: 241).

ideologically a site-of-struggle. May the struggle continue, *a luta continua*, into the next generation.

Conclusion

African entangled time includes the Bible, “re-membering” (West 2016d: 364–65) it but also being re-configured by it (Peel 2000: 9; West 2016d: 7–8). Whether African biblical scholars approve or not of why and how the Bible is used in African contexts (Maluleke 2000b), those of us “who are committed to the struggle for liberation and are organically connected to the struggling Christian people” have to engage, Takatso Mofokeng argues, this African reality—and its entangled past and future trajectories—and so must “do their best to shape the Bible into a formidable weapon in the hands of the oppressed instead of leaving it to confuse, frustrate or even destroy our people” (Mofokeng 1988: 40). Such is our summons by and our accountability to our African communities. The African scholarly academy and its Euro-American mother-master offer us useful resources, but let us not forget what is the nature of our primary task.

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Those Incommensurate Activities We Call “Biblical Studies”: A Future-Oriented History of Their Bifurcated Present

Stephen D. Moore

The Tale

The present and future of biblical studies? The present is uncertain, the future unknown.

Let's try again. The present of biblical studies is uncertain because it has yet to be processed, itemized, narrativized. It has yet to be packaged as the past.

To speak of *the* past of biblical studies, however, is necessarily to speak of *a* past.¹ The sociocultural location of the biblical studies chronicler will cause “the” past to configure in specific ways, and if the confident chronicler should turn presumptuous prophet, convicting biblical studies in the present or foretelling its future, he or she will be attempting to extend that always over-tidy tale of the past into the present and to extrapolate from its current profile to predict its future contours.

But a further problem complicates this already knotty project. *Biblical studies is not one*. Biblical scholars do not agree on the ultimate objectives of the discipline, a disunity that is especially apparent on the global level. This essay narrates the saga of biblical studies as a tale of two disciplines that is also a tale of two worlds. One version of biblical studies makes its home primarily in the Global North, while another version of biblical studies makes its home primarily in the Global South. (To affirm that division is already to oversimplify a more complex phenomenon, but sweeping statements and over-tidy generalizations are inescapable elements of any disciplinary metanarrative.)²

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- 1 As Roland Boer and Fernando Segovia rightly note in their introduction to *The Future of the Biblical Past*: “[B]iblical criticism does not have one agreed-upon past. It has multiple pasts.... The futures that spring from these pasts are equally multiple” (Boer and Segovia 2012: xvi).
 - 2 The principal oversimplification to which the present essay has recourse concerns the extent to which speaking of a Global North/Global South divide in biblical scholarship elides the presence of minority communities of biblical interpreters in Northern biblical scholarship—a kind of South within the North; it would be equally possible to speak of a kind of North within the South.

The Teller

So much for the tale; what of the teller? What of my own sociocultural location, crucible for the story of biblical studies I will conjure up? The story is easier to specify than the location, but perhaps the story tells the tale of the location. For me, to speak of the past, or even the present, of biblical studies is to tell a tale of intellectual entrepreneurship and critical consumerism; it is to construct a narrative of rising and falling methodologies, hypotheses, and theories; advancing and receding research topics and trends; and big names and big books with littler names and littler books scurrying in their wake—all of which is to say that I have been formed professionally in the incubator of Euro-American biblical scholarship with its fastidious fixation on method and its inflated estimation of innovation.

Roland Boer and Fernando Segovia argue in their incisive introduction to *The Future of the Biblical Past* that organizing a retrospective-prospective survey of biblical scholarship in terms of biblical books, or even biblical-critical methods, “obscures matters such as the global division of labor, patterns of exploitation, and issues related to gender and race” (Boer and Segovia 2012: xvi). They opt instead to organize their own volume in terms of “geopolitics and culture” (Boer and Segovia 2012: xvi). Their strategy stands as a caution to me not to neglect the factors they highlight in the methods-and-innovation-centered saga of the discipline I proceed to recite anyway—I speak of what (I think) I know—not least because these factors are also intrinsic to my own professional location (which is easier to describe than my muddled cultural identity as someone from a working class background in a long-vanished Ireland who still thinks of himself as more Irish than American, notwithstanding compelling evidence to the contrary).

I teach in a theological school nestled in a small liberal arts college on the outer rim of the New York metropolitan area. The town in which the college sits is largely white and affluent, but most of the seminary students who sit in my classes are not. The majority hail from U.S. minority communities and many others come from the Global South. The passion of so many of these seminarians for economic, racial, and environmental justice constantly holds my feet to the fire in the classroom. They are hungry for more than historical criticism, and so are the congregations to which many of them minister. They crave contextual biblical criticism of various stripes: liberationist, feminist, queer, postcolonial, ecological (not that these are mutually exclusive categories). But many of them are also hungry for historical criticism, I hasten to add. The seminary classroom can be a china shop space in which I sometimes find myself tiptoeing around brittle faith in the verity of the biblical text.

My doctoral seminars are a different matter. Ethical inquiry still looms large but now conjoined to untrammelled intellectual inquiry. If in the seminary classroom I feel myself to be obliquely connected to the church, in the doctoral seminar I feel myself to be obliquely connected to the extrabiblical academy. These connections are also tensions. Biblical studies has long been situated in a squirmingly uncomfortable spot: too academic for the church, too churchy for the academy. Here, indeed, are two further actors for the tale this essay will tell. Not only will it need to be a tale of two disciplines and a tale of two worlds; it will also need to be a tale of two institutions, church and academy, and the possibly incompatible demands they impose on their adherents.

The Plateau

Let's consider how we got to be where we are with a view to imagining where we might be going. What narrative may plausibly be told of the past half century of biblical studies, in the United States primarily, since that's what I know best, but also more broadly, even globally so far as I am capable?

First, a brief preview of where my tale of U.S. biblical studies will take us. If the history of the discipline is to be chronicled in terms of methodological innovation over that fifty-year span (I attempt to set aside that lens in the second part of the article and attend to geopolitics and culture, as Boer and Segovia recommend), it seems to me that in the United States, at any rate, a slowing, indeed a plateauing, has set in during the past fifteen years or so. More specifically, in relation to the twenty-five years that have elapsed since the founding of *Biblical Interpretation* (the anniversary impelling this publication), what I seem to see is a brisk bustle of methodological innovation initially that begins to dissipate as the current century opens.

The View North

Consider first the quarter century between 1967 and 1992, primarily on the New Testament side of the testamentary divide (the side on which I normally huddle). *Redaktionsgeschichte* was still being excitedly assimilated by New Testament scholars in the United States in the late 1960s,³ and, rather

3 Norman Perrin's *What Is Redaction Criticism?* came out in 1969. The first major work of redaction criticism by a U.S. scholar had appeared the previous year, J. Louis Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968).

astonishingly, it remains the *sine qua non* for most scholars of the canonical Gospels even today. Biblical structuralism also began to rear its then startling head in the late 1960s (Barthes 1988a [1969], 1988b [1972]; cf. Marin 1971; Calloud 1973). The journal *Semeia* was launched in the United States in 1974, principally as a forum for biblical structuralism and its closest methodological kin, but *Linguistica Biblica* had already been established in Germany in 1970 for the same purpose, and *Sémiotique et Bible* would follow in France in 1975. In the 1970s, too, the structuralist offshoot known as narratology was being tentatively applied to biblical narratives. New Testament narrative criticism was one result of the experiment (Rhoads 1982; Rhoads and Michie 1982; Culpepper 1983), with reader-response criticism in tow (Fowler 1981). Comparable developments in the narrative analysis of the Hebrew Bible were, of course, also underway in these years (Fokkelman 1975; Alter 1981; Berlin 1983). Poststructuralism made its official debut with the *Semeia* volume *Derrida and Biblical Studies* (Detweiler [ed.] 1982; cf. Miscall 1983), although it would be almost another decade before poststructuralist monographs and essay collections would begin to trickle forth in earnest (Phillips [ed.] 1990; Jobling and Moore [eds.] 1992; Moore 1992).

Entirely unrelatedly, certain paradigm-realigning developments in Pauline studies had been named "the New Perspective on Paul" (Dunn 1983). Two books that decisively marked the arrival of social-scientific methodology in New Testament studies had appeared a little earlier (Elliott 1981; Malina 1981), and in 1986 the Context Group was formed.⁴ The first paradigmatic works of feminist biblical criticism had also been published, those of Phyllis Trible (1978, 1984) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983). Before long, Renita Weems (1988) had added a womanist counterpoint to the rising feminist chorus (cf. Martin 1990). *Stony the Road We Trod* (Felder [ed.] 1991), the first anthology of African American biblical scholarship, soon followed (cf. Wimbush 1985–86, 1989; Felder 1989).

And all the while traditional, mainstream biblical scholarship flooded forth in quantities enormous enough to render all the innovations and interventions detailed thus far mere spume on its mighty wave. An adequately encompassing history of the mainstream during the period we are considering would be all but impossible to relate (the ordinary is what always most resists narration). I will content myself with speculating about its future a little later.

The Jesus Seminar had held its inaugural meeting in 1985. Based on its work and a flurry of other related but differently positioned work, a third quest for the historical Jesus was declared to be underway. 1992 saw the launch of *Biblical*

4 Although it did not adopt that name until 1989.

Interpretation, which joined *Semeia* as a second journal outlet for experimental work in biblical studies. The first volume devoted to ideological criticism of biblical texts also appeared that year (Jobling and Pippin [eds.] 1992). The postmodernism debate raging across the humanities began to impact biblical studies in the mid- to late 1980s, eventually engendering a number of books, most notably *The Postmodern Bible* (Bible and Culture Collective 1995; cf. Adam 1995; Adam [ed.], 2000, 2001; Jobling, Pippin, and Schleifer [eds.] 2001).

Voices from the Margin (Sugirtharajah [ed.] 1991) also appeared around this time, soon followed by the two volumes of *Reading from This Place* (Segovia and Tolbert [eds.] 1995a, 1995b)—but I'll reserve discussion of those landmark collections for the other tale of the discipline I will shortly tell.

In the mid- to late 1990s, the first volumes devoted to postcolonial biblical criticism and what would eventually come to be known as empire-critical biblical studies appeared (Donaldson [ed.] 1996; Horsley [ed.] 1997; Sugirtharajah 1998; Sugirtharajah [ed.] 1998). Autobiographical criticism also made a smaller if nonetheless significant splash in those years (Anderson and Staley [eds.] 1995; Staley 1995; Kitzberger 1998), as did the poststructuralist spinoff known as new historicism (Rowlett 1996; Moore [ed.] 1997; Hens-Piazza 2002). As the twenty-first century opened, queer titles began to appear in biblical studies (Goss and West [eds.] 2000; Moore 2001; Stone [ed.] 2001), culminating in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (Guest, Goss, West, and Bohache [eds.] 2006). The Earth Bible series also appeared, decisively launching ecological hermeneutics (Habel [ed.] 2001a, 2001b; Habel and Wurst [eds.] 2000, 2001; Habel and Balabanski [eds.] 2002). And Asian American biblical hermeneutics found expression in three notable volumes (Liew and Yee [eds.] 2002; Foskett and Kuan [eds.] 2006; Liew 2007). Meanwhile, the journal *Semeia* closed shop in 2002 but in 2005 the online journal *The Bible and Critical Theory* opened for business.⁵

What of the past decade or so in U.S. biblical interpretation? In New Testament studies at least—to speak again of what (I imagine) I know best—most of the innovative energy that characterized the preceding decades seems to have dissipated. The third quest for the historical Jesus has petered out (the ever-elusive Nazarene having once again evaded his pursuers). The new perspective on Paul is no longer new or even recent. The scholars writing self-styled social-scientific work on New Testament texts (at least of the

5 What have I left out? Much, no doubt, such as the arrival of cultural studies in biblical studies in the mode attentive to contemporary popular culture (think, especially, of all the work on Bible and film that has been done), the arrival of masculinity studies in biblical studies, and the ebb and flow of major research topics too numerous to name, ranging from the maximalist-minimalist debate on ancient Israel to the interrogation of Gnosticism as a category able to hold water.

cultural-anthropological variety) seem to be largely the same scholars who launched the trend in the 1980s.

Two broader developments, relevant to both testaments, should also be noted. Postmodernism has withered and all but vanished as a viable concept in the fields of the humanities in which it first flourished. Correspondingly and increasingly since the 1990s, theory-attuned biblical scholars, younger scholars in particular, have ceased to appropriate the term "postmodern" for their projects.⁶ Empire-critical work on biblical texts, meanwhile, even or especially when informed by postcolonial theory, seems to be spinning its wheels in a night in which all cows are gray and all texts ambivalent in relation to empire.

What, then, is new? Performance criticism, which seeks to situate biblical texts fully in their ancient oral contexts and reconstruct their performance and reception in those contexts, is largely new (Doan and Giles 2005; Giles and Doan 2009; Rhoads 2006a, 2006b).⁷ Trauma has recently emerged as a significant theme for a significant number of biblical scholars (Janzen 2012; Kotrosits and Taussig 2013; Becker, Dochhorn, and Holt [eds.] 2014; Carr 2014; Boase and Frechette [eds.] 2016; Brett 2016).

Signal developments in critical theory, however, of the past decade or more have only had a slight impact on biblical studies or, as yet, no impact at all. Animality studies has made some inroads (Koosed [ed.] 2014; Moore 2014; Moore [ed.] 2014; Stone 2017), but has yet to be fully embraced by biblical scholars who were already engaged in ecological hermeneutics. Affect theory has also had a minor impact (Koosed and Moore [eds.] 2014; Kotrosits 2015, 2016), but the kind of work on ancient emotions that scholars in Europe and North American are now beginning to undertake does not engage with affect theory for the most part (e.g., Mirguet and Kurek-Chomycz 2016). The disparate body of theory commonly grouped under the label "the new materialism(s)" (Coole and Frost [eds.] 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Keller and Rubenstein [eds.] 2017), and commonly seen as marking a decisive break with poststructuralist theory and (another) turn away from the "linguistic turn" in theory generally, has yet to have any appreciable impact at all on biblical studies.

Yet it is not as though biblical studies in the United States or the Global North generally has been languishing, scholars twiddling their thumbs and anxiously wondering whether they might have anything yet unsaid left to say about this modest collection of ancient texts called the Bible after hundreds of years and millions of monographs of critical biblical scholarship. They are as

6 I have reviewed in detail elsewhere (Moore 2016) the demise of postmodernism as a concept and movement both within and outside biblical studies.

7 See also Wipf and Stock's *Biblical Performance Criticism* series, thirteen volumes of which have appeared at the time of writing.

productive as ever, happy as bees in a hive.⁸ They are talking animatedly and incessantly to each other. For we mainly white Euro-American biblical scholars do talk mainly to ourselves, and we have been content to do so for quite some time. But more on that below.

Looking South

A tidy tale of the kind just told cannot be recited—at least not by me—for biblical scholarship in the Global South during the period we have been considering. In common with many other biblical scholars in the Global North, my first real glimpse of the breadth of biblical scholarship being produced in the South, and my first real sense of contextual biblical hermeneutics⁹ as a transnational liberation movement within biblical scholarship, came with the first edition of *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Sugirtharajah [ed.] 1991). *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, the second volume of *Reading from This Place*, followed a few years later (Segovia and Tolbert [eds.] 1995b; cf. Segovia and Tolbert [eds.] 1995a).

The contextual modes of biblical interpretation showcased in both volumes had already been practiced for decades in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and other regions of the Global South. Already in 1989 Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner were able to write in their introduction to *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*: “There is now an enormous range of material being produced by exegetes in the Latin American countries, most of it untranslated. What is important is the way in which this work frequently relates closely to the pastoral practice of the churches, reflecting the close contact many exegetes themselves have with the struggles of the poor and marginalized” (Rowland and Corner 1989: 1). Justin Ukpong in his contribution to the 828-page collection, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (West and Dube [eds.] 2000), writes similarly of the period of African biblical hermeneutics beginning in the 1970s

8 Those who are fully employed, that is. The American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature employment report for 2015–2016 announced “an historic low for jobs in religion” (<https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/jobsReportAy16.pdf>). An entirely different narrative of the present and future of biblical studies than the one I am attempting to tell might be extracted from that report.

9 *Contextual hermeneutics* is the most widely used of a series of terms employed more or less interchangeably for the same critical sensibility. This open-ended list also includes *inculturation hermeneutics*, *vernacular hermeneutics*, *cultural exegesis*, *cultural interpretation*, *intercultural interpretation*, and *cultural studies*.

as marked by a dual preoccupation with inculturation and liberation, yielding numerous studies of Africa in the Bible, of the Bible in African contexts, of the Bible as resource for (or impediment to) liberation for Africans, and of the exegetical agency of nonacademic African interpreters (Ukpong 2000: 12, 14–25). While Ukpong readily concedes the influence of Western historical-critical methodologies on African biblical scholarship, what is distinctive for him about the latter—and, he goes so far as to say, about “all Third World approaches to biblical interpretation” (Ukpong 2000: 25)—is that it is *contextual* at base, centrally concerned not with “identif[ying] ... the meaning intended by the [biblical] author” but “with linking the biblical text to the reader’s context” (Ukpong 2000: 25).

Venturing to speak for the present and future of biblical scholarship in Asia, Philip Chia in his contribution to *The Future of the Biblical Past* (Boer and Segovia [eds.] 2012) sounds an equally contextual note: “To make biblical studies relevant to Asians, ... the text (the Bible) and the context (Asia) need to intersect with each other.... [T]he challenge for the future of the biblical past in Asia seems to be not so much what biblical scholars do inside the academic arena but rather how they present their findings to the people outside academic circles.... The real question is what has the Bible to do with Asian lives today and tomorrow?” (Chia 2012: 92).¹⁰ Needless to say, not all the biblical scholarship practiced in Asia is contextual in focus. In South Korea, in particular, many biblical-scholarly publications and much that transpires in the biblical studies classroom falls comfortably under the historical-critical rubric.¹¹ The editorial in a recent issue of the Asia Theological Association newsletter (Villanueva 2016) tells of the experience of a Korean biblical scholar who, following the *Sewol* ferry disaster of 2014, reached out to fellow Korean biblical scholars for reflection papers on the tragedy only to be greeted with silence, which she took to mean (1) that these colleagues understood their professional task to be “descriptive” rather than “prescriptive” (i.e., interpreting what the biblical texts meant in their ancient contexts rather than relating their meanings to

10 Chia focuses primarily on China and India but claims that the challenge of relevance facing biblical scholars in these countries is “representative of the Asian experience as a whole” (Chia 2012: 91). The interreligious facet of the challenge is outlined by Sugirtharajah: “An Asian reading of the Bible has ... not always been a smooth one. It is a contrived reading and not as natural as a Hindu reading of the Bhagavad Gita, a Buddhist reading of the Dhammapada, or a Chinese reading of the Analects.... Most of the time, the Bible has to be read against the indigenous religious texts” (Sugirtharajah 2013: 5).

11 Samuel Cheon seems to express impatience with this phenomenon in his survey article on biblical interpretation in South Korea, calling on scholars “to move beyond simply introducing Euro-American biblical scholarship and reflect more seriously on the Korean context” (Cheon 2006: 44).

contemporary contexts), and (2) that most of the scholars had received their training in Western institutions.

Yet the preponderance of the biblical scholarship practiced in Asia would seem to be increasingly contextual.¹² Consider as a recent example the program of the Fifth Biennial Meeting of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies, held in Seoul in 2016. Of the twenty-six papers in the program, only four bore titles that unmistakably signaled a primary concern with the ancient context of the biblical text. Otherwise, contemporary contexts predominated, ranging from macro-contexts (such as globalization or the ecological crisis) to micro-contexts (such as the extra-academic biblical interpretations of Madiga Christians in rural Andhra Pradesh or of taxi drivers in Chennai). Contextual hermeneutics also accounted for more than half the papers presented at the 2016 International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, also held in Seoul. The conference's inaugural plenary session set the contextual tone: "Biblical Studies from the Four Corners of the World."

Slipping Control

What does the increasing predominance of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean¹³ portend for the future of biblical studies globally, given that the locus of lived Christianity and hence of active engagement with the Bible will continue to move South (Jenkins 2006: 8–10, 2011: xi–xiii)? Any adequate answer to that question is layered with complexity.

"Biblical scholarship continues to be managed and controlled by the West," Sugirtharajah states in his afterword to the third edition of *Voices from the Margin* (2016b: 603). There are moments, no doubt, when it is cathartic to speak or write as though that were not so. Boer and Segovia make that move in their introduction to *The Future of the Biblical Past*. Western Europe is conspicuous by its absence from the volume, a "gather[ing] of essays from all parts of the world" (Boer and Segovia 2012: xvi). Moreover, "nearly all contributors from the United States hail from diaspora minorities" (Boer and Segovia 2012:

12 Mary Foksett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (2006: xi) note that since the 1980s, "Asian biblical scholars working from the methodological approach of contextual hermeneutics have multiplied manifold, to the extent that it is no longer uncommon to find younger Asian biblical scholars writing their dissertations from such a perspective."

13 For Caribbean biblical hermeneutics, see Thomas 2010; for "island" hermeneutics more broadly, see Havea, Aymer, and Davidson 2015.

xvii). This bold omission of Western European and Euro-American biblical scholarship—what the editors term “the point of imperial ‘origin’ [that] has long since lost its leadership role” (Boer and Segovia 2012: xvi)¹⁴—occurs, however, in a volume published by the American-based Society of Biblical Literature. The transnational showcasing of contextual biblical hermeneutics in Seoul in July 2016 also took place under the continent-spanning canopy of the Society of Biblical Literature.¹⁵ Yet the management and control of biblical scholarship by the West was slipping noticeably in Seoul where less than half of the biblical scholarship featured was of the West, not just in the sense that most of the scholars presenting papers hailed from the Global South but also, and more significantly, in the sense that most of the papers presented employed hermeneutical strategies developed in the South.

And it is not impossible to imagine that by the time the centennial edition of *Voices from the Margin* rolls around, if not long before, Christianity having continued to migrate South, the International SBL Meeting will be a conference of ten thousand people or more, while the original *Voice from the Center* will have reduced to a fading chorus of a few hundred at most at the National SBL Meeting, a community of historical critics still fondly fixated on ancient empires, still talking incessantly to itself.¹⁶

14 In fairness, Boer and Segovia should be quoted at more length: “Western Europe is absent from the collection. This is not through want of trying; but because one contributor after another was unable to complete the task, we agreed in the end to leave Western Europe blank. Is this not a significant omission, given the crucial role that Western European and Protestant biblical scholarship has played in the development of modern biblical scholarship? We do not think so” (Boer and Segovia 2012: xvi).

15 The Society of Asian Biblical Studies Meeting was held in conjunction with the much larger International Society of Biblical Literature Meeting and granted space in the ISBL program book.

16 Mind you, we do have many rich conversations, and find many things to say that we simply could not say in a contextual Bible study. Granted, many or most of the conference papers and publications these conversations yield have no practical value beyond stimulating further conversations of this kind, and so on in an endless spiral of esoteric productivity. Many of us do like to think, however, that our technical discourse on the Bible has a trickle down effect, that some of our more consequential conclusions at least will eventually seep into the collective consciousness of some church congregations and possibly even beyond. And occasionally they do ooze down, but more often they do not. Should that give us serious pause? Should academic discourse on the Bible be significantly constrained by pragmatic concerns? How much heed should biblical scholars in the United States, say, pay either to the institutional church tugging at one sleeve with questions about the practical relevance of what we do, or to the corporate university tugging at the other sleeve with similar, if differently motivated, questions? All of this merits an essay

The Voice from the Center

Let's extend the caricature a little further.¹⁷ *Voices from the Margin* is a 600-page monument, but *Voice from the Center* is an altogether taller and far older monument. The so-called *Center* is an oddly proportioned edifice, a mile high at least, yet only an inch wide at most. In his "Afterword" to the anniversary edition of *Voices from the Margin*, Sugirtharajah laments: "[W]hen one confines and dedicates one's life to a minute study of John 3:16 at the expense of the wider culture, ... then one needs to question such excessive interest in isolated ... and disconnected exegesis" (2016b: 601). Yet a scholarly obsession with John 3:16—the most widely translated verse in the Bible, the most frequently tattooed verse of the Bible—hardly qualifies as an arresting example of excessive biblical-scholarly subspecialization. John 16:3 would be a better object for unnatural obsession, as would John 3:15 or 3:17. And any of these less hallowed verses, about which so much less has been said, might also be a more plausible subject for an exegetical article in, say, the true *Voice from the Center*, the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, whose latest issue, as I write, contains dedicated articles on Proverbs 6:2; 1 Kings 17:21; Luke 17:22; 2 Corinthians 2:1; 1 Timothy 6:13; and 1 Peter 1:6—all chapter-and-verse references one sees rather less rarely than John 3:16 on Christian T-shirts or tattooed on Christian bodies. The most avid reader of a highly technical article on 1 Peter 1:6, one suspects, is likely to be the writer of a commentary on 1 Peter, most of all a colossal commentary of the kind mainly consulted by writers of technical articles.¹⁸ All of which is to say, once again, that the *Voice from the Center* talks mainly to itself.

of its own, but in the interests of manageability, I have opted to write the present essay as though these particular complications did not exist.

- 17 A caricature that began with a paper I was invited to contribute to a book panel on the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Voices from the Margin* (Sugirtharajah [ed.] 2016) hosted by the Asian and Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics Section at the 2016 annual meeting of the SBL in San Antonio.
- 18 In fairness, it should be noted that the current editor of *JBL*, Adele Reinhartz, has succeeded in opening up the outer edges of the journal to the larger academic world, and even the extra-academic world, to an extent that no previous editor has done. This has the effect, however, of foregrounding the two-disciplines, two-worlds phenomenon that is the subject of the present essay. A recent *JBL* Forum, for instance, titled "Black Lives Matter for Critical Biblical Scholarship," shares an issue with "Remarks on a Coptic Sahidic Fragment of 3 Kingdoms, Previously Described as an Apocryphon of Solomon"; "2 Maccabees 10:1–8: Who Wrote It and Where Does It Belong?"; and other such articles.

The Training Ground

Prospective Ph.D.s from the Global South, however, must ask to be admitted to the conversation. For if academic biblical scholarship is to be measured by such criteria as the concentration of Ph.D.-accredited faculty, the locus of Ph.D.-granting institutions, the best-funded departments and programs, the largest and best-equipped libraries,¹⁹ the most populous professional associations, the largest publishing houses with the most expansive backlists, and so on, then the center, or centers, of the discipline are indeed located in the Global North. The latter continues to be the professional training ground for Ph.D. candidates from the Global South, but such students not uncommonly experience their training in terms of irrelevance to their cultures of origin and even in terms of (further) intellectual colonization (cf. Dube 2005: 189). Whereas the locus of lived Christianity has shifted South, and, apparently, will continue to shift South for the foreseeable future, graduate biblical studies programs have continued, and will continue, to be concentrated in the North, also for the foreseeable future; and Ph.D. candidates from the South who intend to return to teach or pastor there will continue to risk being rendered marginal to their social contexts by Northern biblical professionals, most of whom are marginal to theirs.

The Center at the Margin and the Margin at the Center

Biblical studies as generally practiced in the Global North is even a marginal discipline within the academy. Too much of what we do is simply too, well, *biblical* for the larger academy, which often has trouble distinguishing obsessive Bible reading from regressive Bible believing. For many, if not most, communities of faith, meanwhile, biblical studies is simply too technical, too skeptical, too academic. And because academic biblical studies has so little purchase on the lives of the vast majority of Christians and Jews in the United States and the Global North generally, not even registering as a blip on their collective consciousness, academic biblical studies is an utterly peripheral phenomenon in political discourse, and public discourse in general, even here in the United States in which the Bible still wields a degree of cachet as a religio-cultural icon

19 Gerald West and Musa Dube, introducing *The Bible in Africa* (2000: 2), poignantly note: "[W]hile we know that this book will find its way into libraries around the Western world, we also know that most libraries in Africa will not be able to afford it."

that has largely dissipated in western Europe.²⁰ My point is simply that the *Voice from the Center* is actually a voice from the margin in relation to Western societies—not only marginal in the sense that relatively few people know what the *Voice from the Center* is saying but also in the sense that most people actually don't care what it's saying.

What does that make *Voices from the Margin* and the infinitely larger body of contextual biblical scholarship from the Global South of which it is representative? Sugirtharajah writes retrospectively in his introduction to the third edition of *Voices*: “Biblical Studies itself is a marginal discipline within the humanities, and the minority hermeneutics that [the first edition of] *Voices* represented was of only modest interest within this marginal discourse” (2016a: xiii). It seems to me, however, that contextual biblical hermeneutics must, by now anyway, be regarded as much more than the margin of a very marginal margin. Social relevance is regularly a burning imperative for such scholarship. Most of the scholarly voices of *Voices from the Margin*, and the now colossal corpus of other such contextual work, strive to speak for, and even to, “ordinary” Bible readers in places where most of the people on the planet live. The *Voices from the Margin*, thus contextualized, are actually anything but marginal, nor is contextual hermeneutics in general.

Sermonic Scholarship

If contextual hermeneutics represents the probable future of biblical studies on the global scale, it is a future bearing an uncanny resemblance to a now remote past. The sermon has long been the exiled other, the constitutive other, of critical biblical scholarship, the sermon seeming to be everything that critical biblical scholarship is not supposed to be. Contextual hermeneutics, however, appears to be in bed, or at least in the pulpit, with the sermon. What contextual hermeneutics has in common with the sermon is a shared central concern to bring an ancient text into explicit dialogue with a contemporary context.

20 Uncritical genuflection before the Bible is a reflexive political act in the United States. Donald Trump, to cite a recent example, when asked in a radio interview on April 14, 2016 whether his character or thinking had been (in)formed by a favorite Bible verse, replied: “Well, I think many. I mean, when we get into the Bible, I think many, so many. And some people, look, an eye for an eye, you can almost say that. That’s not a particularly nice thing. But you know, if you look at what’s happening to our country, I mean, when you see what’s going on with our country, how people are taking advantage of us, we have to be firm and have to be very strong. And we can learn a lot from the Bible, that I can tell you” (cited in Morton 2016).

Contextual hermeneutics and the sermon both seek to enable the biblical text to speak directly to a contemporary community in order to encourage certain kinds of reflection and certain kinds of action. The audience of a sermon is generally a community of faith; the audience of an exercise in contextual hermeneutics is typically also a community, or communities, of faith.

Contextual hermeneutics thereby demolishes—not so much brick-by-brick as with one great whack of the wrecking ball—the most formidable wall erected by critical scholars of the Bible during the discipline's formative phase in post-Enlightenment Europe: the partition between sermon and scholarship. If the sermon was confessional, scholarship had to be professional. If the sermon was measurable in terms of devotional, pastoral, or moral yield, scholarship was measurable in terms of additions to the cumulative sum of knowledge in the field. If the preacher danced obliviously on the brink of the gulf separating the ancient world from the modern world, the scholar picked his steps with elaborate care on the edge of the precipice.

The esoteric expertise and arcane specialization that became the professional badges of the biblical scholar in eighteenth-century Europe were designed not just to separate scholarship from the sermon, however, but also to snatch the Bible from the jaws of the Hydra-headed monster the Reformation had unleashed: the non-elite interpreter able to read the Bible in the vernacular and to read into it anything and everything the Holy Ghost might be imagined to inspire. If Protestantism ostensibly represented the removal of priestly mediation and the opening up of scripture to the "common man," the invention of technical biblical scholarship provided a new kind of authoritative mediation. An elite class of accredited experts, successors to the priestly mediators of the Middle Ages, now ringed the biblical text protectively and sought to guard it from the fanciful interpretations of the undisciplined lay reader.²¹

Rewarding the Recondite

The esoteric imperative still impels mainstream Euro-American biblical scholarship. We reward each other lavishly for being comprehensible only to each other. In the "better" universities, colleges, and seminaries (which also pay better), we esteem scholarly monographs over books pitched to the general public and we prize technical articles in peer-reviewed journals over less abstruse articles in widely circulated periodicals. Arcane scholarly discourse in little-read publishing outlets ringed about by expert gatekeepers is the *sine qua non*

21 Further on these discipline-constituting developments, see Sheehan 2005: 46–48, and building on him, Moore and Sherwood 2011: 77–81.

for tenure and promotion at these better schools. There is little professional incentive for the biblical scholar to address himself or herself to the general public; and so long as the biblical specialist is trained primarily to dialogue only with other biblical specialists, there is little reason why the general public would want to hear from him or her anyway. This is the case whether his or her professional specialization is Akkadian and Ugaritic loanwords in ancient Hebrew, the possibility of Western non-interpolations in New Testament texts other than the Gospels, or the implications of Deleuze and Guattari's parapsychological theory of language for biblical hermeneutics.

The Great Divide

For reasons such as these, I see the difference between contextual hermeneutics, on the one hand, most especially the versions of it oriented to the exegetical agency of "ordinary" readers,²² and just about every other version of biblical hermeneutics, on the other hand, as the ultimate dividing line within biblical studies at present, the "bifurcation" of my essay title. If ordinary-reader-oriented contextual hermeneutics indeed represents a major feature of the future of biblical studies globally, then the big hand on the disciplinary clock will have moved back several centuries and biblical scholarship will have begun anew, on altogether different foundations than those laid in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and with dramatically different goals.

Indeed, to the extent that such scholarship is already being widely practiced in much of the world, the future of biblical studies is already here, already present, and establishing complex relations with the remote past of biblical studies. Within the realm of contextual hermeneutics, biblical scholarship as inherited from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe threatens to crumble and come apart, even more than within the realm of, say, poststructuralist biblical criticism,²³ in order to be reinvented and reformed as something

22 An orientation with its roots in Latin American liberation theology (the classic example being Cardenal 2010 [1975–77]), but especially associated with Africa during the past fifteen or twenty years (e.g., West 1999; West [ed.] 2007; Dube [ed.] 2001; Kinyua 2011; Sarojini 2012). For further examples of ordinary-reader-oriented hermeneutics from diverse cultural locations, see "Part Six: Peoples as Exegetes: Popular Readings" in Sugirtharajah [ed.] 2016: 529–92.

23 Not that poststructuralism was ever more than a gnat on the mammoth body of historical biblical criticism. Contextual biblical hermeneutics exists on an exponentially larger scale than biblical poststructuralism ever did, and, consequently, has the potential, at least, to stand over against historical criticism as a countervailing force.

other than what biblical scholarship was in its formative phase, which is to say—among other things, and somewhat reductively no doubt—an elite white European ideology.²⁴

Anxious Inquiries

"But what of the ideology, or ideologies, of the biblical texts?" Thus the secularized liberal in me anxiously inquires, concerned that too much of the contextual biblical interpretation practiced in the Global South implicitly construes the biblical text as ideologically pure, an uncompromised instrument of liberation. For many of us from the Global North who are domiciled in departments of religion or philosophy in secular colleges or universities or who lurk in liberal seminaries, the Bible is grubby with human handprints. It is a Good Book but not the best. When it comes to ethics, in particular, it is the book of colossal contradictions. Does the acute responsiveness of much contextual hermeneutics to the needs of communities of faith come with a price? What does it cost to deliver a scholarly sermon? Does it necessarily preclude critical elements not ordinarily found in regular sermons, such as a serious coming to grips with troublesome biblical texts that historically have fueled theological anti-Judaism and racial anti-Semitism, together with patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia, and even slavery in its day? Does it necessarily preclude interrogations of the human, all too human biblical God and of the divine, all too divine biblical Christ? Can it effectively engage in interfaith dialogue, or appraisal of indigenous religious traditions, without overtly, or even covertly, privileging the Christian tradition? And so on.

The Future of the Field and the Future of the Planet

Beyond these anxious questions for contextual biblical hermeneutics, I have two further future-oriented questions for biblical scholarship in general, whether Northern or Southern. When will significant numbers of us, not least those of us who purport to be interested in empire and committed to resisting

24 Remarkably, after more than two decades of postcolonial biblical criticism, one is still hard-pressed to name a dedicated study of correlations and affiliations between the expansion and ascent of the European empires in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, on the one hand, and the invention of critical biblical scholarship in the same European states during the same time period, on the other.

it, accord a prominent place in our scholarly deliberations to the phenomenon of globalization, which is to say twenty-first century neocolonialism, or empire today? And when will significant numbers of us attend in our scholarship to the current unfolding apocalypse, the global problem of climate change?²⁵ The neocolonial megaproblem is not unrelated to the ecological megaproblem. Postcolonial preoccupations with cultural identity, territory, and sovereignty now intersect inextricably with environmental concerns with nature, soil, and water—acute concerns in vast reaches of the Global South in particular and certain to become ever more pressing in coming decades, in the North as well as in the South.

What, or where, is the future of biblical studies? The future of biblical studies is, or should be, bound up with the future of the planet.

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25 Symptomatic of the surprising neglect of both globalization and climate change even in contextual biblical hermeneutics issuing from the Global South is the fact that globalization is mentioned only in passing in a handful of the essays in the 2016 edition of *Voices from the Margin*, and climate change is scarcely less prominent in it. It is instructive to compare *Voices* in this regard with Nayar 2016, the latest anthology of postcolonial studies, but one that ends with a section of essays on the ecological crisis and a section of essays on globalization.

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“Staying with the Trouble”: Climates of Change in Biblical Studies

Ken Stone

Biblical interpretation, we now often observe, always takes place in a context. It therefore seems necessary to acknowledge that we are reflecting on “The Present and Future of Biblical Studies” in a political context that has changed significantly since the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Given the failure of so many pundits to predict the outcome of that election, it may seem foolhardy to imagine that we can speculate on the “future” of biblical studies, or of much else for that matter, with any confidence. But the consequences of the election, though still unfolding, are likely to have an impact far beyond the current moment and far beyond the increasingly fraught borders of the United States. Among such consequences, the implications for academic research, though murky, are worrisome. The National Endowment for the Humanities, as well as scientific and biomedical grants at the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes for Health, are being targeted as wasteful spending (Achenbach and Sun 2017; Deb 2017; Simon 2017). Government positions in so-called STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which are often privileged in higher education, are going unfilled (Kang and Shear 2017). Scientific work on environmental issues in general, and climate change in particular, appears to be especially endangered (Epstein, Mooney, and Mufson 2017) and was largely ignored when the U.S. government announced its withdrawal from an international agreement on climate change. In a context where scientists have had to resort to copying and protecting data on climate change before the government can erase it (Dennis 2016), and government spending for climate projects is dismissed as “crazy stuff” by cabinet officials (Cama 2017), we may wonder whether academic research has any future at all. Clearly the “present” of biblical studies cannot remain unaffected by the chaotic times in which we find ourselves worrying over a small corpus of ancient texts.

The particular texts that biblical scholars study are likely to continue to receive attention, however. After all, self-described (but mostly white) “evangelicals,” who profess a strong commitment to the Bible’s importance, have been among the strongest supporters of the new presidential administration both during and since the election (Smith and Martínez 2016; Smith 2017). Such support may seem, on the surface at least, to have little to do with the

Bible's content. But as Erin Runions has shown, "invocations of biblical authority" facilitate the advancement of political, military, economic, familial, and sexual norms even when such "theopolitical" invocations take coded or contradictory forms or are mediated through popular culture (Runions 2014: 1, *passim*). If "politics and 'scripturalization'—the human activity of treating texts in an elevated way—are intertwined," as Runions convincingly argues (2014: 8–9), then engagement with biblical literature and biblical interpretation is likely to remain crucial in both the present and the future. The question we need to ask is what forms (and I use the plural intentionally) such engagement might usefully take.

I have chosen to explore that question here under a phrase borrowed from the title of Donna Haraway's recent book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). Haraway may seem an unlikely dialogue partner in this context. A feminist critic with a background in science studies and an eclectic set of research and writing interests, she certainly makes no claim to be a biblical scholar. Indeed, several scornful references in *Staying with the Trouble* to "monotheism," "the sky gods," and various phrases that allude to biblical concepts (e.g., "edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures") occur in contexts that indicate a preference for giving attention to myths other than, or opposed to, the Bible (e.g., Haraway 2016: 1–2, 31, 39, 51–57). While she is known as a "theorist" (e.g., Schneider 2005), Haraway's academic career did not begin in the fields that are usually engaged by biblical scholars interested in "theory"—such as literary studies or continental philosophy—though she is conversant with them. She earned her Ph.D. in biology with a dissertation that was, in her own words, "a hybrid between history of science, philosophy, and biology" (Haraway 2000: 19). Though her work is occasionally cited in biblical studies (e.g., Moore [ed.] 2014; Buell 2014; Uhlenbruch 2015), her influence in our field has been rather limited. Over the last few years, however, I have found myself returning to Haraway's "hybrid" publications while completing a book on biblical interpretation and contemporary animal studies (Stone 2017; cf. Stone 2016a, 2016b). Although I am especially interested in Haraway's interdisciplinary work on animal-human relations (e.g., Haraway 1989, 2003, 2008), I have become increasingly allured by the possibility that her original, if sometimes quirky, writings can help us rethink our assumptions about the ways in which we read and write about biblical texts in unsettling times that are characterized by, among other things, environmental degradation. In fact, the mismatch between her work and the genres of academic writing that most often appeal to biblical scholars is one of the reasons why Haraway appeals to me. In the discussion that follows, then, I will draw upon elements of her work to think through some of the ways in which we might "stay with the trouble"

of biblical interpretation. In a final section, I also turn to a reflection on the story of Noah's ark in dialogue with not only Haraway but also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of "reparative reading" (Sedgwick 2003).

Troubling Borders

Although I have highlighted the U.S. presidential election as a constitutive feature of our present, Haraway observed before that election that we "live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times" (Haraway 2016: 1). Among the features of our times that make them troubling, Haraway is especially attuned to a series of ecological, "multispecies" challenges, including climate change and species extinctions, which have become more severe since the mid-twentieth century. But Haraway rightly understands such challenges to be interwoven with histories of imperialism, capitalism, racism, and gender injustices. In attempting to respond to such intersectional challenges, we may be tempted by uncritical optimism ("making an imagined future safe" by hoping that we will be rescued by either gods or technology [Haraway 2016: 1]) or despair ("the game is over, it's too late, and there's no sense trying to make anything better" [Haraway 2016: 3]). Both of these responses avoid trouble rather than grappling with it. Pointing out that "trouble" is derived from an old French verb "meaning 'to stir up,' 'to make cloudy,' 'to disturb,'" Haraway argues that "our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (Haraway 2016: 1). Rather than fleeing trouble, we should respond to it here and now. But our "response-ability" in the face of "exterminating forces" (Haraway 2016: 2) requires a commitment in Haraway's view to "staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times," in order that "who lives and who dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice" (Haraway 2016: 3).

Of course, suggesting that we need to respond to troubling times is one thing. Deciding how to do so from a particular academic location, such as biblical studies, is another. But if we learn anything from Haraway, it would surely be to refuse the more limiting constraints of our academic discipline when we respond, even as we continue to build on its most useful insights and approaches. Long before her recent emphasis on the word "trouble," Haraway was known for troubling boundaries between various modes of knowledge. One of her most famous essays, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," first published in 1985, already positions itself as "an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (Haraway 1991: 150, her

emphasis). A “cyborg,” after all, is “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 1991: 149). In today’s technological society, with its numerous “couplings between organism and machine” (Haraway 1991: 150), we all find ourselves living multiple forms of cyborg reality. But Haraway uses reflection on such realities to challenge not only the boundary “between organism and machine” but also other sorts of boundaries, including the opposition between nature and culture, “the separation between human and animal” (Haraway 1991: 152), distinctions among clearly bounded identities (which Haraway analyzes as “fractured identities” [Haraway 1991: 155]), distinctions among branches of knowledge (“science, technology, and socialist-feminism”), and even the opposition between “reality” and “fiction.” And such challenges recur throughout her writings. The destabilization of boundaries between humans and other animals, for example, which has been so important for the rise of contemporary animal studies (Calarco 2015), is elaborated in Haraway’s more recent works on “companion species” (Haraway 2003, 2008), which I return to below. And *Staying with the Trouble* is consistent with Haraway’s earlier books in undermining the distinction between “reality” and “fiction.” A recurring “figure” in the book is the abbreviation “SF,” which Haraway uses to refer to a series of phenomena that she treats as interrelated resources for staying with the trouble: “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far” (Haraway 2016: 2). Rather than keeping these phenomena apart to pursue methodological purity, Haraway intermingles them promiscuously whenever such intermingling seems useful for responding to the trouble at hand. To the extent that one can reconstruct a method from her writing, it might be captured best by her use of the “string figure” to talk about the way she goes about her work, tracing various “threads,” focusing on the “knots” that result when multiple threads become “entangled,” and telling stories about how those knots came together and what they produced in particular times and places. But such threads are followed across the borders of genre and discipline. In the face of troubling times, Haraway turns for resources not only to innovative thinkers (especially women) in the sciences, philosophy, and anthropology, but also to science fiction, visual art, novels, and, significantly for biblical studies, myths. The boundaries between genres are continually transgressed.

While Haraway’s emphasis on troubling boundaries resonates with my own interest in “queering” biblical interpretation (e.g., Stone 2013; Hornsby and Stone 2011), there can be little doubt that biblical studies as a field is structured through a series of boundaries and exclusions, institutionally, methodologically, and rhetorically. Within the broader field of religious studies, biblical scholarship is constituted not simply by its rather narrow object of study but also by

distinctions between guilds. The relationship between the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion, for example, may have moved further apart and closer together over time; but the boundary between them is maintained through numerous institutional and economic realities (memberships, program committees, publications, shared physical spaces, travel budgets, banter in the halls of professional meetings, etc.). Controversies that sometimes flare up around such boundaries tell us much about prevalent and competing values that “fracture” biblical studies. Published expressions of concern about SBL affiliation with entities that hold explicit religious commitments, such as the Society of Pentecostal Studies, generally do ask legitimate questions about free inquiry, scholarly conventions, and the criteria used to structure genres of academic argument (Hendel 2010; Berlinerblau 2011). But it is nearly impossible to read such expressions of concern without suspecting that the walls of proper biblical scholarship are being policed from both directions, and not only from the side of religious orthodoxy, especially when some of those expressions assume that an affiliation with the American Schools for Oriental Research, for example, would present no difficulties.

Although I have little interest in controversies between professional societies *per se*, I do believe they point toward more deeply seated border anxieties about the boundaries of our work. It is no secret, for example, that biblical scholarship exists in a complex relationship to the traditions of Judaism and Christianity that utilize biblical literature as scripture. Still today, most scholars come to the field with some sort of religious background. Many scholars retain such commitments throughout their career, though usually in more muted forms than those that shape the Society for Pentecostal Studies or such evangelical organizations as the Institute for Biblical Research. And many positions in biblical studies, including my own, are located in seminaries, university divinity schools, or colleges with some religious affiliation. While it is sometimes said that historical criticism of the Bible stands over against theological or confessional approaches to it, the truth is considerably more complicated. In his famous essay “The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism,” Gerhard Ebeling associates historical criticism with the Protestant Reformation, since it relies upon the principle that each reader of the Bible should be able to interpret it without interference from church authorities (Ebeling 1963: 9–61). Burke Long makes a compelling case that the North American “Albright school,” while stressing scholarly objectivity, archaeology, and philology, in fact was grounded in social processes that included considerable respect for the Bible’s religious authority (Long 1997). Hector Avalos, who is upfront about both the religious motivations that brought him to biblical scholarship and his subsequent atheism,

argues that “bibliolatry is still what binds most biblical scholars together, whether they see themselves as religious or secular, champions of Western culture or multiculturalists, evangelical Christians or Marxist hermeneuticians” (Avalos 2007: 340). Motivated in part by the use of the Bible to sanction violence, Avalos proposes that, if biblical studies is going to continue at all, it should “redefine its purpose so that it is tasked with eliminating completely the influence of the Bible in the modern world” (Avalos 2007: 341). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, on the other hand, motivated just as strongly by a feminist concern about the contributions of the Bible and biblical interpretation to violence and oppression, argues not only for the continued political importance of biblical scholarship but also that “biblical studies will have to overcome the institutionalized dichotomy between graduate training in the university and ministerial education in schools of theology” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999: 29). Clearly the boundaries between biblical scholarship and religious reading constitute a site of trouble.

Toward the end of a “Modest Manifesto,” first published in *Biblical Interpretation* and then republished in a volume of his essays, Stephen Moore discusses these boundaries in a way that seems to me compatible, at least, with Haraway’s “*pleasure in the confusion of boundaries*” (Haraway 1991: 150, her emphasis). After discussing several developments in non-biblical literary studies that have been taken up by biblical scholars, Moore notes that literary studies have recently made a “postmethodological swerve” (Moore 2010: 370). Literary scholars associated with, say, queer theories, cultural studies, or affect theories seldom appear to be worried about laying out a series of replicable steps that other scholars can follow to produce a close reading of a text (cf. Koosed and Moore 2014: 385–86). Biblical scholars, on the other hand, including those pursuing interdisciplinary work, seem at times to suffer from what Moore calls a “methodone addiction” (Moore 2010: 356; cf. Moore and Sherwood 2011: 31). In Moore’s view, this fixation on method is at least partly a reaction against the religious background of biblical studies:

Methodology is what is meant to keep our discourse on the Bible from being subjective, personal, private, pietistic, pastoral, devotional or homiletical. Methodology, in short, is what maintains the partition between sermon and scholarship. The homily has long been the constitutive other of biblical criticism, and methodology the enabling condition of such criticism—“methodology” throughout being a cipher for “objectivity,” “neutrality,” “distinterestedness,” and the other related and foundational values of biblical studies as an academic discipline....

MOORE 2010: 370; CF. MOORE AND SHERWOOD 2011: 40

Moore goes on to note, however, that “our quarantine of biblical criticism from the homiletical” has come at a “cost”: the “wooden” application of our proliferating methods to biblical texts in “a mountainous excess” of “dull and dreary” close readings. Moore is therefore led to ask: “Can we move beyond methodology in biblical studies without writing sermons pure and simple?” (Moore 2010: 370).

Moore glimpses a possible affirmative answer to that question in what he calls “contextual hermeneutics.” Here Moore has in mind the emergence of writings that highlight a particular “sociocultural location”—associated, for example, with racial or ethnic identity, national or geographical location, and so forth—as part of the process of interpreting biblical literature. Such writings may not position themselves as “postmethodological”; but “what contextual hermeneutics has in common with the sermon,” Moore suggests, “is a shared central concern to bring an ancient text into meaningful and explicit dialogue with a contemporary context” (Moore 2010: 371). It is clear that Moore is not encouraging a return to pre-critical interpretation. Even as contextual hermeneutics brings a critical lens to the interpretation of biblical literature and the contexts in which it was written, however, it also interprets the contexts in which, and the situations from which, that interpretive lens is being deployed. By focusing its attention not only on biblical texts written in the past but also on sociocultural realities in the present, contextual hermeneutics may, in Moore’s view, be usefully paired with forms of non-biblical cultural studies that give as much attention to contemporary cultural forms as they do to traditional literary texts.

It is significant that, in making this point, Moore refers to the work of Fernando Segovia (e.g., Segovia 2000). For in his SBL presidential address published a few years after Moore’s article, Segovia goes even further in emphasizing the contemporary contexts in which biblical studies takes place. Noting his position as the first SBL president “from outside the West,” Segovia builds his address around “a critical reading of the global scene,” a reading that is simultaneously historical and contemporary (Segovia 2015: 7). This reading leads Segovia to speak, by the end of his address, about a “crisis in the world system,” which is seen and experienced “from a variety of perspectives” in the “Global North” and the “Global South” (Segovia 2015: 25). This crisis is characterized in terms of “global economics, climatological projections, and worldwide migration” (Segovia 2015: 18). Although Segovia focuses in particular on economics, he also references in passing an influential article on the significance of climate change by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), which I return to below. Reflection on this global crisis—or, perhaps better, “convergence of crises” (Segovia 2015: 26)—leads Segovia to propose an ambitious “interpretive project for our

times" (Segovia 2015: 25). Informed by thick, multi-perspectival analyses of our global crises, as seen from both "Global North" and "Global South" and as analyzed from multiple disciplines, biblical scholars might devote themselves to "the following foci of attention: (1) the texts and contexts of antiquity; (2) the interpretation of these texts and contexts, and the contexts of such interpretations, in the various traditions of reading the Bible, with a focus on modernity and postmodernity; and (3) the interpreters behind such interpretations, and their corresponding contexts" (Segovia 2015: 26). Segovia is clearly trying to push biblical studies beyond disciplinary constraints. Indeed, he closes his article, not by summarizing or demonstrating a new method of biblical criticism, but rather by engaging the novelist George Orwell and the poet Pablo Neruda. His goal is not simply to experiment with novel approaches, but rather to encourage biblical scholars toward a "conjunction of the scholarly and the political" (Segovia 2015: 29). Thus he seems to me a good example of a biblical scholar who, like Haraway, is putting aside disciplinary boundaries "to stir up potent response to devastating events" (Haraway 2016: 2). And, significantly for my purposes, he gives attention not only to particular diverse contexts (which are referenced throughout, in both his main text and his lengthy footnotes) but also to our larger global context as a whole, including a climate catastrophe.

Of Contexts, Climates, and Companions

Like Segovia, Haraway gives attention both to our larger global context and to multiple contexts found within it. Her reading of our context, too, is of a world in crisis—or rather, in "trouble." Where Segovia acknowledges climate change as a significant concern while focusing primarily on economics, Haraway devotes more attention to climate change without losing sight of economics. But climate change is for Haraway only one part of a broader set of environmental challenges.

These challenges lead Haraway to engage contemporary arguments that we have now entered a new geological epoch. According to some scientists, the impact that humans have had already or are having now on the earth's climate, geochemical processes, water cycles, species distributions and extinctions, and so forth "are strong evidence that humankind, our own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system" (Steffen, et al., 2011: 843). Thus they propose the term "Anthropocene" to suggest "that the Earth is now moving out of its current geological epoch" and that "humankind has become

a global geological force in its own right" (Steffen, et al., 2011: 843; cf. Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007).

This proposal generates controversies. One set of disagreements involves "the birth of the Anthropocene" (Davies 2016): When, and on what basis, should one say the Anthropocene epoch started? Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize winner closely associated with the term, suggests that it began in the late eighteenth century, on the basis of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane trapped in polar ice during that era (Crutzen 2002). Alternatively, one can focus on broad processes going back to the origins of agriculture and its associated manipulation of the environment (Smith and Zeder 2013), or on narrower processes of geologic stratigraphy (Zalasiewicz, et al. 2008).

Such distinctions are not irrelevant for biblical interpretation. A decision to associate the beginning of the Anthropocene with the emergence of agriculture would include the world that produced the Bible within it, whereas alternative dates would not. It is striking, in fact, that ecological theorist Timothy Morton appeals to the creation account in Genesis 2–3, with its association between the origins of agriculture and God's curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17–19), to buttress his argument that our current ecological crises are grounded in an "agrilogistics" that is continuous with the emergence of Mesopotamian agriculture (Morton 2016: 38–40). While some biblical scholars emphasize the Bible's agricultural context as part of an attempt to revalue the Bible's approach to nature and environment (e.g., Hiebert 2008; Davis 2009), Morton uses the provocative phrase "we Mesopotamians" (Morton 2016: 6, 9) to suggest that "the Mesopotamian logic" of ancient agriculture "eventually created global warming" (Morton 2016: 15). Here the Bible's ecological context would stand in continuity with our current ecological crises. But however one understands the origins of the Anthropocene, our contemporary *reading* of the Bible takes place within it.

If this first set of disagreements about the Anthropocene is articulated in rather technical, scientific terms, a second set of controversies involves philosophical and political questions. Nearly all scholars discussing the Anthropocene acknowledge that we have entered an era when human impacts on the environment, including climate change and species extinctions, are reaching devastating proportions. To the extent, however, that the term "Anthropocene" implies that the entire human race as such—"Anthropos"—contributes equally to these impacts, it obscures significant differences of geography, historical context, nation, class, race, gender, and so forth that have structured the modern industrial processes that exacerbate ecological destruction. Thus some scholars use the term "Capitalocene" to indicate that current

ecological crises were produced less by humanity as such than by the specific processes set in motion by Western capitalism and colonialism (Moore [ed.] 2016).

Not everyone is convinced that this is sufficient reason to dismiss the notion of an Anthropocene. Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that, even though capitalism and colonialism played primary roles in getting us into our current “planetary crisis” (Chakrabarty 2009: 197), we are now in a species-wide situation of “shared catastrophe” that “cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism”:

While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present. The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history.

CHAKRABARTY 2009: 212

Our conventional ways of narrating history find it difficult to grapple with these realities, as Chakrabarty, himself a historian, notes. Old distinctions between human history and natural history are now useless—and so too any border between the human sciences and the natural sciences, which has thoroughly shaped nearly every school of modern hermeneutics since Wilhelm Dilthey. We have now become geological agents, and this transforms our understanding of humanity itself:

We can become geological agents only historically and collectively, that is, when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself. To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species. We seem to be currently going through that kind of a period.... A fundamental assumption of Western (and now universal) political thought has come undone in this crisis.

CHAKRABARTY 2009: 207

“The crisis of climate change,” Chakrabarty later notes, “calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary prejudices” (Chakrabarty 2009: 215).

Although Haraway finds the term “Capitalocene” to be in several ways preferable to “Anthropocene,” she acknowledges that the term “Anthropocene,” which has already become widely disseminated in the academy and even the

media, remains useful. One of her concerns about it, however, is that it continues to separate humanity from the rest of life in “stories of Man,” rather than encouraging “multispecies well-being” (Haraway 2016: 52, 51, *passim*). What we need more than “either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene,” Haraway asserts, are ways of understanding “ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet” (Haraway 2016: 55). Thus she utilizes the term “sympoiesis”—“making with”—in order to emphasize the fact that neither humanity nor capital can make, unmake, or remake the world alone (Haraway 2016: 58, *passim*).

Here and elsewhere in *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway is building on her earlier work on “companion species,” which has been influential for animal studies (e.g., Haraway 2003, 2008; cf. Calarco 2015: 51–52, 79 n. 8). Indeed, Haraway’s writing troubles a border between animal studies and ecological studies that is often conflictual (cf. Peterson 2013). As explicated by Haraway, “companion species” include, but are not identical to, “companion animals,” those individual animals (such as pets) with whom many humans live. The notion of companion species is used in a more comprehensive sense to analyze what Haraway calls “co-constitutive human relationships with other critters” (Haraway 2008: 73). Thus it encompasses a wider range of types of interactions among humans, other animals, and plants than simply the relationships between humans and pets. Haraway notes that human nature and human cultures do not preexist interactions with other species. Individually and collectively, humans “become who they are” with other living and non-living entities in particular “situated histories, situated naturecultures” (Haraway 2008: 25). Among other things, we must ingest some species of plants or animals to exist at all. Against tendencies to understand human existence independently of other living beings and material circumstances, Haraway argues that we are always “entangled” with other “critters” in specific “contact zones” (Haraway 2008: 4–5). Haraway takes the phrase “contact zone” from canine agility training; but she notes that it occurs also in postcolonial studies, acknowledging thereby that power relations and histories of conflict structure companion species relationships. Starting from specific examples of species interaction in particular contact zones, then, Haraway explores interactions between companion species in ways that make animals agents of history, active participants worthy of sustained attention rather than simply objects in the “background” or “context.” While Haraway is especially interested in interactions between humans and dogs, she also gives attention to other companion species—including other domesticated animals such as sheep—and to the histories of labor, economy, technology, geography, migration, colonialism, ethnic

relations, gender relations, and so forth, that shape the contact zones in which humans and companion species co-evolve. Significantly, Haraway includes novels, photographs, and other forms of symbolic representation among the sites that are useful for analyzing companion species relations. Thus, one could conclude from Haraway's work that biblical texts, too, with their many references to animals and plants, can be interpreted as products of co-constitutive companion species relationships that "entangled" the writers of the Bible in the contact zones we more often refer to as the Bible's ancient contexts.

Now only a few biblical scholars to date have engaged the "strings" of interdisciplinary animal studies with which Haraway's work on companion species is associated (e.g., Koosed [ed.] 2013; Moore [ed.] 2014). Although much work remains to be done here, I argue elsewhere that many of the animal species referred to in the Bible, and particularly goats and sheep, can be considered examples of "companion species" in Haraway's sense (Stone 2016a, 2017). Their presence testifies to the origins of biblical literature in the "situated naturecultures" of the ancient Levant, where, as histories of domestication and zooarchaeological evidence have shown, the herding of goats and sheep was crucial for human livelihood before and during the periods in which biblical literature was written (cf. MacDonald 2008; Boer 2015). Given how intertwined the narrated lives of Israelite ancestors are with their companion species, it is unsurprising that biblical writers found in relationships with sheep and goats a rich resource for political and religious imagery, which shaped the biblical understanding of sacrifice (cf. Klawans 2006a, 2006b). Like other ancient texts, biblical literature utilizes the language of shepherding and flocks to refer to both human leaders and God, on the one hand, and the people they lead, on the other hand. The consequent impact of specific species of animals—flocks of sheep and goats—on Western literary and religious thought is considerable. We only have to imagine how differently Judaism and Christianity might have evolved if the cross-species relationships used to represent relationships between humans and God involved elephants and mahouts, for example, rather than flocks and shepherds.

But Israel's companion species did not only influence the content of the Bible. Biblical manuscripts were literally preserved on animal skins. At least one biblical scholar has proposed a connection between the use of parchment and the process of canonization itself. Menahem Haran notes that, in Egypt, where papyrus was more popular than parchment, "skins were retained for works of particular importance or of special use, such as collections of laws, records which were intended to be preserved for a long period of time, or particular books which were put on display in temples" (Haran 1983: 112). Because

parchment lasts longer than papyrus, animal skins were deemed more suitable for the recording of documents that the Egyptians wanted to survive over extended time periods. Haran suggests that similar practices were likely followed in pre-exilic Israel, when most written materials were probably recorded on papyrus. By the time of the Talmud, however, the use of skins for the production of Torah scrolls was required. Haran argues that this transition from papyrus to parchment likely took place during the Second Temple period, as first the Torah and then other texts gradually came to be regarded as holy books. The development of Judaism into a religion that consulted an identifiable set of writings to guide communal life necessitated the selection of writing materials that could withstand the passage of time, allowing significant texts to be passed down and read by future generations. Parchment met this need, and became the preferred writing surface for books that were increasingly granted a central religious role. Thus the processes that we call canonization correlate with a growing use of animal skins. What we now call the Bible was literally created from animal skins, and the religions that relied upon it drew their life, in part, from the bodies of dead animals.

But the bodies of dead animals also contribute significantly to our current ecological crisis. Our modern system of industrialized animal agriculture imposes considerable suffering on the billions of animals killed and eaten by humans every year, as well as the workers (mostly lower class and people of color) who slaughter them (cf. Pachirat 2011). This “violence,” this “industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries,” “this torture,” to quote Jacques Derrida (2008: 25–26), has recently been the provocation for an extraordinary rethinking of religion and religious studies by Aaron Gross that includes attention to the role of the Bible and other traditional texts in both justifying and challenging such violence (Gross 2015). But animal agriculture also contributes directly to environmental destruction, through such mechanisms as deforestation, habitat modification, chemical degradations of the environment, and climate change (Weis [ed.] 2013; Kemmerer 2015). Moreover, our systems for generating meat are contributing to the current crisis of animal extinctions, another component, along with climate change, of the Anthropocene (Barnosky 2014).

Extinction is a significant concern too, for Haraway, who goes so far as to speak of “human-propelled mass extinctions and multispecies genocides” (Haraway 2016: 130; cf. 37, 55). Here Haraway is responding to the claim among scientists that we may be entering a “sixth mass extinction” of animal life, comparable to the extinction of the dinosaurs (Ceballos et al. 2015; Barnosky 2014;

Kolbert 2014; Meyer 2006). While that earlier extinction is most often attributed to a natural disaster, probably an asteroid, the primary causes for extinctions today are actions that humans have taken as both our numbers and the scale of our exploitation of the earth's resources have increased. Anthropogenic contributions to extinctions are diverse, including habitat destruction, deforestation (often to raise cattle), modification and depletion of water systems, the introduction of so-called invasive species, overhunting and overfishing, various types of pollution, and, now, climate change. But the cumulative effect is disturbing: we have become the asteroid.

If the effects of our current global ecological crises, including mass extinctions, are multispecies in nature, so too, Haraway believes, our attempts to understand and respond to ecological crises must be multispecies in nature. Haraway thus agrees with scholars in extinction studies and the environmental humanities such as Thom van Dooren that one of the arts scholars need to relearn in our troubling times is that of "multispecies storytelling" (Haraway 2016: 10–16, 38–40; cf. Van Dooren 2014). Haraway insists, however, that our stories should become more experimental: "we *must* change the story; the story *must* change" if our multispecies world is to survive and thrive (2016: 40). We need, she tells us, more "speculative fabulation" (2016: 8). In the face of challenges associated with the Anthropocene, she turns for resources not only to stories from science and the humanities but also to stories from science fiction, visual art, novels, and, significantly for my purposes, myths. Haraway herself is most interested in myths that she calls "great chthonic tales" (Haraway 2016: 173 n. 4). Although she makes passing references to ancient Near Eastern myths (e.g., Haraway 2016: 173 n. 4), she has little to say about biblical literature. But this turn, or return, to elements of myth, which Haraway recommends as part of our strategy for addressing our contemporary multispecies crises, brings me back to biblical interpretation.

Reparative Reading in Troubling Times

Ecological issues are not absent from biblical studies. For two decades, a number of scholars have attempted to develop an ecological hermeneutics of the Bible (e.g., Tucker 1997; Habel [ed.] 2000; Habel and Trudinger 2008; Horell, et al. [eds.] 2010). This work sometimes fits the pattern of methodological fixation discussed by Moore and Sherwood, applying traditional historical and philological tools to the Bible's representation of its environment or following replicable steps of "suspicion, identification, and retrieval" that are associated

with “ecological criticism” (Habel 2013: 39, *passim*). The eclectic troublemaking found in Haraway’s work, by contrast, goes further than most ecological readings of the Bible in the “confusion of boundaries” (Haraway 1991: 150). But the primary difficulty with ecological criticism to date is that the guild as a whole seems content to allow it to exist as one among many marginal “criticisms,” which can be pursued in segregated program units by those who are interested but which need not worry other scholars. Apart from ecological critics, few biblical scholars give attention to the fact that ecological crises now confront us all on a global scale, as Haraway and Segovia both recognize. Whether we acknowledge it or not, those of us who are able to travel to academic conferences or publish in international journals are now all reading the Bible as “geological agents” of the Anthropocene, to recall Chakrabarty’s phrase.

In suggesting here that we all share a context of global ecological crises, I do not mean to imply that ecological crises take the same form or involve the same dynamics in every local context. Such a suggestion would itself be anti-ecological, denying the variability of diverse ecosystems. Haraway treats such local sites as “knots,” whose tangled threads need to be traced carefully in processes of multispecies storytelling that necessarily require attention to geography, economics, migration, colonialism, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and so forth. But these knots are “multispecies knots,” involving not only humans and our socio-historical realities but also other living creatures who are caught up with us in “the great unmaking of life in this era known as the Anthropocene” (Rose 2012: 128).

In light of our multispecies ecological challenges and Haraway’s emphasis on changing the stories we tell, I want to consider here briefly a biblical story that I believe needs to be retold in new ways if we are going to stay with our contemporary ecological trouble: the story of Noah’s ark in Genesis. Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston once referred to this story as “the first Endangered Species Project” (Rolston 1994: 48). Although this claim may sound humorous, Rolston took seriously the ways in which this “quaint” “parable” and other biblical texts could be read in support of species diversity. As Rolston sees it, the “motivation to save endangered species” is not simply “pragmatic, economic, political, and scientific,” but also “moral, philosophical, and religious” (Rolston 1994: 48). While Rolston wishes to improve relations between science and religion, he is not claiming that the Bible is either a scientific document or a religious authority. Rather, by recalling the “parable” or “myth” of Noah’s ark, as well as several other biblical texts, Rolston reminds us that the survival of diverse life forms is an ancient value, indeed, an imperative. When God tells Noah to bring into the ark every “kind” of animal, “every living thing,

all flesh," God explicitly says this is to "keep them alive" (Gen. 6:19). The story's recognition of the value of all types of animals, and not simply the species that are useful to humans, has never been more important than today, Rolston suggests, when "the ancient myth" of mass extermination of animals "has, for the first time ever, become tragic fact" (Rolston 1994: 49). Now, more than ever, we need to remember that Noah "is commanded to save them all" (Rolston 1994: 49). Here we clearly have an attempt to, in Moore's words, "bring an ancient text into meaningful and explicit dialogue with a contemporary context" (Moore 2010: 371). By retelling Noah's story in a time of endangered species and ecological destruction, Rolston hopes to remind us of what Haraway calls our "response-ability" (Haraway 2016: 2): preserving other species is our mandate, as it was Noah's.

This narrative emphasis on the survival of diverse forms of animal life is not simply biblical. We know that other ancient societies told similar versions of the flood story, which included the preservation of all types of living things on a boat. Rolston is not the only writer outside of biblical studies, moreover, to see in this story a kind of parable for our need to address the plight of endangered species (e.g., Mann and Plummer 1995). I argue elsewhere, however, that this way of retelling the ark myth should become one part of a larger retelling of the Hebrew Bible's story of animal life. Such retelling knits together texts from several different parts of the Bible, including not only Genesis 1 with its emphasis on the creation of various "kinds" of animals and plants (the same Hebrew terminology used for "kinds" of animals in the Noah story) but also Psalm 104, the God-speeches in Job, and various other passages (Stone 2017). By reading these passages alongside one another in conscious response to extinction concerns, we may find, to our surprise, not simply a Bible story but a story about the Bible that does not entirely support the versions of human exceptionalism that lead us to believe we can do whatever we wish without regard for our impact on other species.

Moreover, given the close relationship between species extinctions and global warming (Thomas, et al., 2004; Barnosky 2014), this story of rising and receding waters might also be taken as a parable for climate change and other environmental hazards. (Here we might recall Haraway's suggestion that "our task is ... to settle troubled waters" [2016: 2].) That the story can be retold in ways that address environmental destruction, and that such retellings can reach a wide audience, should be evident now from the 2014 Darren Aronofsky film, *Noah*. After all, Aronofsky and others involved in the production of the film stated explicitly that they intended it to send an environmental message, and viewers of the film took it that way, whether criticizing it for its supposed

“radical environmentalism” or characterizing it positively as “a kind of *mi-drash*” for our troubled times (Markoe 2014).

Some ecological readers of the Bible express reservations about the flood story because it is not simply a story about the preservation of animal kinds, but also a story of death. God does, after all, kill many more people and animals than God saves on the ark (Habel 2009: 11–16). But it is not irrelevant to my “fabulation” that mass death takes place in the story precisely because the earth has been “corrupted” and “filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11). Thus the story stands alongside other biblical texts that also associate environmental devastation and the deaths of animals and plants with human violence. In Jeremiah 12, for example, when the writer complains about those who act treacherously, the impact of their misconduct does not fall only on other humans. In Jer. 12:4, the writer articulates something like a lament for the land and the life that should thrive on it. “How long,” Jeremiah asks, “will the land mourn, and the vegetation throughout the field dry up? Because of the wickedness of those who live in it, the animals and the birds are swept away.” Using a word for “wickedness” that is also applied to humans in the story of Noah (Gen. 6:5), and a word for the “land” that is identical to the “earth” “corrupted” in Genesis 6:11, Jeremiah represents the desolation of the earth and the disappearance of animals and birds as consequences of human evil. The writer sees animals and birds being extinguished, and this is evidence that humans are acting immorally. Jeremiah 9:10, too, articulates a lament for creation in the context of devastation that has come about because of human transgression. In addition to weeping for “mountains” and “pastures,” the verse notes that “the voice of cattle is not heard, the birds of the skies and the animals have fled and are gone.” A similar understanding appears in Hos. 4:3, where the prophet, after listing a series of human evils, exclaims, “Therefore the land mourns, and everything that lives on it withers. Also the living creatures of the field and the birds in the skies, and even the fish in the sea are disappearing!” Such texts understand humans to be responsible, ultimately, for the vanishing of animals and birds. This understanding of the disappearance of animals can be read into Noah’s story as well. God may be the narrative agent of destruction in the flood myth, but human actions are still the cause—as they are, today, of ecological destruction. The cumulative effect of human activity is a massive death of humans and other animals. And in this context, God commands Noah to keep animal species alive.

There are, of course, several difficulties with retelling Noah’s story as an environmental fable. The consequences of endless repetitions of a passage such as Gen. 9:1–3, for example, with its divine justification of human population

growth, eating animals, and animal fear of humans, seem troubling indeed in an age of ecological crisis. While I have already noted the relationship between meat-eating and environmental degradation, questions about human overpopulation are just as volatile. Environmentalists note that even if one addresses unequal distributions of resources, the ecological consequences of having between nine and 11 billion humans on the planet by the end of the twenty-first century are potentially devastating (Cafaro and Crist 2012). Partly in response, Haraway has proposed the provocative slogan, “Make kin, not babies,” as part of her project of telling new stories for troubling times. One of her goals in coining such a slogan is “to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species,” encouraging new kinship relations to support multispecies flourishing overall (Haraway 2016: 102). Whether her slogan will find an audience is unclear, though it makes a good partner with queer, feminist, and other reorganizations of kinship. But the use of Genesis 9 to justify unlimited human reproduction without regard for consequences reminds us that biblical literature, coming as it does from an ancient world very different than our own, certainly assumes and promotes some values that need to be criticized from the perspective of our contemporary troubles.

But should criticism of biblical texts completely dominate our interpretation? In a provocative essay titled “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls attention to “the very productive critical habits embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’” (Sedgwick 2003: 124). As Sedgwick notes, Ricoeur originally described the hermeneutics of suspicion, with exemplars in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, as one interpretive option alongside others, including “the philological and theological ‘hermeneutics of recovery of meaning’” (Sedgwick 2003: 125). Yet in Sedgwick’s view, much contemporary theory and criticism has taken up suspicious reading “as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (Sedgwick 2003: 125). In dialogue with psychoanalysis, Sedgwick re-describes suspicious readings, including her own and those of other queer and feminist theorists, in terms of the “negative affect” of “paranoia.” This move allows her to explicate such features of suspicious reading as its “practice of disavowing its affective motive and force and masquerading as the very stuff of truth,” or its “faith” in “the effects of exposure” and “demystification” (Sedgwick 2003: 138–39). Although Sedgwick never disallows suspicious reading, she reminds us that other possibilities for interpretation exist. In particular, she emphasizes what she calls “reparative” reading. A reparative reading does not stand in binary opposition to a paranoid or suspicious one. Sedgwick

rather understands reparative and paranoid stances as “positions” between which one “oscillates.” Certainly reparative reading does not deny in any naïve sense the realities of oppression or violence tracked by the “vigilant scanning” (Sedgwick 2003: 132) of suspicious interpretation. But reparative reading is motivated by other affects, and other motives, than critical demystification. From an admittedly dangerous world filled with dangerous objects, the reparative process finds and reassembles, or “repairs,” “resources” for “nourishment,” “pleasure,” and “amelioration” (Sedgwick 2003: 128, 144). In Heather Love’s words, reparative reading “contrasts with familiar academic protocols like maintaining critical distance,” offering instead a “realm of experimentation and pleasure” (Love 2010: 236).

Now the literary and queer studies context for Sedgwick’s essay is admittedly different than the discipline of biblical studies, where the hermeneutics of suspicion is still dismissed as anachronistic by many scholars. Sedgwick’s argument for reparative reading has had little influence in biblical studies to date, though it is occasionally mentioned by scholars attempting to re-read biblical texts in dialogue with theories of affect, some of which are influenced by Sedgwick (e.g., Kotrosits 2015: 8–9). In a trenchant study of the story of Noah, Ham, and Canaan that immediately follows the flood story, moreover, Jennifer Knust rightly suggests that some biblical passages and their histories of interpretation will continue to generate a suspicious “burst of rage” rather than lending themselves to reparative reading (Knust 2014: 412). But at a time when any approach to the Bible that doesn’t conform to prevalent norms within the guild is dismissed by some scholars as unscholarly or insufficiently critical, Sedgwick helpfully reminds us that attempts to define a scholarly field by privileging a single type of analysis, even one that has proven necessary such as the hermeneutics of suspicion, impoverish engagement with the objects we study. It seems to me that “reparative reading” might offer biblical studies a better framework than the “homiletical” for moving beyond methodological constraints and finding “resources” for “nourishment” in biblical interpretation. The point, of course, is not to hope that a “sky god,” to return to Haraway’s language, will save us from the devastation we have wrought on the earth. But given the history of using biblical texts, including the early chapters of Genesis, as a “charter upon which human rule over nature was founded” (Thomas 1983: 18), a reading that highlights instead the ancient imperative to keep other forms of life alive may well turn out to offer “resources” for “nourishment” and “amelioration” (Sedgwick 2003: 128, 144) to those readers who are willing to stay with and respond to “exterminating forces” (Haraway 2016: 2) and ecological destruction in our troubling times.

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Index of Authors

- Abel, Jordan 207
 Abeysekara, Ananda 160, 164
 Abogunrin, S. O. 241
 Achenbach, Joel 297
 Ackerman, Susan 23 n. 4
 Adam, A. K. M. 278
 Adamo, David Tuesday 241
 Adelowo, E. Dada 241
 Adema, Seth 209
 Adeyemo, Tokunboh 241 n. 2
 Adorno, Theodor W. 24
 Aglietta, Michel 22
 Ahmed, Sara 135 n. 7, 146
 Aichele, George 101, 102, 109, 136 n. 9
 Allan, Michael 228
 Allum, J. R. 116
 Alter, Robert 277
 Althusser, Louis 23–24, 260
 Anderson, Janice Capel 278
 Anum, Eric 247
 Anzaldúa, Gloria 138 n. 15, 147–150
 Appadurai, Arjun 167
 Appiah-Kobi, Kofi 241
 Arnold, Bill T. 200
 Arnold, Matthew 117
 Avalos, Hector 136 n. 11, 301–302
 Aymer, Margaret P. 282 n. 13, 140 n. 19

 Bach, Alice 97
 Bailey, Randall C. 257 n. 12
 Bal, Mieke 18 n. 3
 Balabanski, Vicky 278
 Baldridge, William 194 n. 26
 Baldwin, James 138 n. 15
 Balzer, David 74
 Bandinelli, Ranuccio Bianchi 70 n. 5
 Barnett, Tony 253
 Barnosky, Anthony D. 309, 312
 Barrier, Jeremy W. 159
 Barthes, Roland 277
 Baugh, Edward 163, 168
 Baur, Ferdinand Christian 217 n. 4
 Beal, Timothy K. 94, 102 n. 12
 Becker, Eve-Marie 279
 Bediako, Kwame 245

 Benhabib, Seyla 219
 Benítez-Rojo, Antonio 157, 166
 Bentley, James 112
 Benvenuto, Jeff 190 n. 18
 Berlant, Lauren 147
 Berlin, Adele 277
 Berlinerblau, Jacques 301
 Betz, Hans Dieter 228 n. 18
 Bielfeldt, Dennis 64 n. 24
 Bisoondath, Neil 210
 Black, Fiona C. 1–4, 6, 8–11
 Bloch, Ernst 24, 26–27
 Blount, Brian K. 141–142
 Boase, Elizabeth 254, 279
 Boer, Roland 2–3, 10, 23 n. 5, 185 n. 8,
 186–188, 194, 196, 274 n. 1, 275–276, 282,
 283 n. 14
 Boesak, Allan 251
 Bohache, Thomas 278
 Bosworth, David A. 108
 Boyer, Robert 22
 Boym, Svetlana 1–4, 6–7, 9–11
 Braeger, Peter 50 n. 14
 Brett, Mark G. 194
 Briggs, Charles Augustus 80–81, 84
 Brinkmann, Vinzenz 70 n. 5
 Brintnall, Kent L. 142
 Brock, Sebastian 39, 61 n. 23
 Buell, Denise Kimber 298
 Bultmann, Rudolf 26–27
 Burnette-Bletsch, Rhonda 219 n. 6
 Burrow, Gwen 127

 Cafaro, Philip 314
 Calarco, Matthew 300, 307
 Calloud, Jean 277
 Calvin, John 43, 63
 Cama, Timothy 297
 Campbell, John 244
 Carden, Michael 19
 Cardenal, Ernesto 288 n. 22
 Carey, Greg 137 n. 14
 Carr, David 279
 Carter, Warren 159
 Ceballos, Gerardo 309

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2 n. 1, 10, 158, 303, 306, 311
- Chanoitis, Angelos 89 n. 11
- Cheon, Samuel 281 n. 11
- Chester, Stephen J. 101
- Chia, Philip 281
- Chitando, Ezra 241
- Chubb, Thomas 65 n. 26
- Claasen, Johannes Petrus 243 n. 4
- Claasens, L. Juliana M. 254
- Clarke, John 71
- Clines, David J. A. 11 n. 8
- Collins, Adela Yabro 134 n. 4
- Comaroff, Jean 245
- Comaroff, John L. 245
- Connolly, William E. 221 n. 9
- Conway, Colleen M. 108
- Coole, Diana 279
- Coomber, Matthew J. M. 125
- Corner, Mark 280
- Cotter, Holland 89
- Coulthard, Glen Sean 9 n. 7, 192
- Crist, Eileen 314
- Crossley, James 185 n. 8, 196 n. 30
- Crowell, Bradley L. 198 n. 34
- Crutzen, Paul J. 305
- Cuadros, Gil 146
- Cuellar, Gregory L. 160
- Culpepper, R. Alan 277
- Curkpatrick, Stephen 96–97, 107
- Curtis, John W. 117
- D'Aguiar, Fred 168, 179
- Dalton, George 20
- Danilova, Ludmila 20
- Darden, Lynne St. Clair 141 n. 23
- Darnton, Robert 231 n. 21
- Datema, C. 59
- Davidson, Clifford 50 n. 14
- Davidson, Vernyl Steed 1–4, 6–10, 50 n. 14
- Davies, Jeremy 305
- Davis, Ellen F. 45 n. 10
- Davis, Norman 45, 48, 52
- Day, Iyko 8 n. 5
- Day, John 23 n. 4
- de Certeau, Michel 112
- de Wit, Hans 240 n. 1
- Deb, Sopan 297
- Deist, Ferdinand E. 241
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. 174
- Denis, Philippe 254
- Dennis, Brandy 297
- Derrida, Jacques 34, 66, 96, 260, 309
- Detweiler, Robert 277
- Dever, William 23 n. 4
- Dickinson, Emily 33
- Dickson, Kwesi 246
- Doan, William J. 279
- Dobbs-Allsopp, F. W. 109 n. 15
- Dochhorn, Jan 279
- Dolphijn, Rick 279
- Donaldson, Laura E. 8, 194–195, 196 n. 31, 197, 200, 201 n. 37, 206 n. 46, 208, 210
- Draper, Jonathan A. 248, 259
- Drews, Arthur 79 n. 8
- Dube, Musa W. 159, 251 n. 8, 252, 261, 285 n. 19
- DuBois, W. E. B. 145, 148
- Dunn, James D. G. 277
- Eagleton, Terry 34
- Ebeling, Gerhard 220 n. 8, 301
- Edelman, Lee 138–140, 142–144, 147–148, 149 n. 31, 150
- Efthimiadis-Keith, Helen 254
- Ehrman, Bart D. 221 n. 10
- Eisenbaum, Pamela 100
- Elkins, Kathleen Gallagher 11 n. 8
- Elliott, John H. 97–99
- Engberg-Pedersen, Troels 228
- Epp, Eldon J. 123
- Epstein, Juliet 297
- Esler, Philip F. 108
- Eustis, Richmond 231–233
- Exum, J. Cheryl 94 n. 2
- Farisani, Elelwani B. 241
- Felder, Cain Hope 277
- Fell, Margaret 236
- Felski, Rita 138 n. 16
- Fokkelman, J. P. 277
- Foskett, Mary F. 282 n. 12
- Foucault, Michel 2 n. 1, 5 n. 3, 11, 75, 103, 107, 235 n. 22
- Fowl, Stephen 97–98
- Fowler, Robert M. 277

- Frampton, Travis L. 216 n. 1
 Franzen, Allen J. 50
 Frazer, James G. 114
 Frechette, Christopher G. 254, 279
 Freud, Sigmund 3, 314
 Friedman, Richard 185, 189
 Friedrich, Markus 115
 Frost, Samantha 279
 Frostin, Per 250

 Getui, Mary 240 n. 1
 Gifford, Paul 258 n. 13
 Giles, Terry 279
 Given, Mark D. 96 n. 7
 Glancy, Jennifer A. 97
 Goldin, Judah 38
 Goldstone, Andrew 103, 109
 Gonzales, L. M. 116
 Gordon, Avery F. 3
 Goss, Robert E. 278
 Greer, Rowan 201
 Gross, Aaron 309
 Guest, Deryn 278
 Gunda, Masiwa Ragies 241, 253
 Gutiérrez, Gustavo 260, 261 n. 16

 Habel, Norman C. 310, 311, 313
 Hackett, Jo-Ann 185 n. 8, 185 n. 9
 Haddad, Beverley G. 251
 Han, Jin Hee 160
 Handley, George B. 168, 176
 Hansen, Ryan Leif 143
 Haran, Menachem 308, 309
 Haraway, Donna J. 10, 298, 299, 300, 302, 304, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 314, 315
 Harnack, Adolf von 117
 Hart, Gillian 246
 Haug, Dag Trygve Truslew 222 n. 11
 Havea, Jione 196, 197, 202, 203, 205 nn. 44–45, 208
 Hendel, Ronald S. 301
 Hens-Piazza, Gina 278
 Hidalgo, Jacqueline M. 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
 Hiebert, Theodore 305
 Hobbs, Joseph J. 112
 Hodgson, Janet 191 n. 21
 Holt, Else 279

 Holter, Knut 246 n. 6, 247
 Horell, David G. 310
 Horkheimer, Max 24
 Hornsby, Teresa J. 300
 Horsley, Richard A. 194 n. 25
 Hort, Fenton John Anthony 117
 Houser, Scott 254
 Huber, Lynn R. 137
 Huet, Valérie 69 n. 3
 Huggan, Graham 247

 Inselmann, Anke 96 n. 4
 Issa, Rana Hisham 222 n. 11

 Jackson, Deborah Davis 209
 James, William 192 n. 23
 Jameson, Fredric 25 n. 6, 103
 Janzen, David 159, 279
 Jay, Nancy 44
 Jenkins, Philip 282
 Jennings, Theodore W. Jr. 96 n. 6
 Jessop, Bob 22
 Jobling, David 18, 201 n. 37, 202, 210 n. 51
 Johnson, Lee A. 98–100
 Johnson Hodge, Caroline 100

 Kalu, Ogbu 258 n. 13
 Kang, Cecelia 297
 Kannengiesser, Charles 216 n. 1
 Kant, Immanuel 39, 63–64
 Kanyoro, Musimbi 241, 251, 253
 Kaoma, J. Kapya 241, 253
 Käsemann, Ernst 119
 Keeling, Kara 144 n. 24
 Keller, Catherine 279
 Kelley, Shawn 137 n. 13
 Kellner, Douglas 26
 Kemmerer, Lisa 309
 Kermode, Frank 222 n. 12
 Kidd, Colin 114
 Kierkegaard, S. 39, 43, 53 n. 18, 56, 66
 Kinoti, Hannah W. 240 n. 1
 Kinyua, Johnson 288 n. 22
 Kitzberger, Ingrid Rosa 278
 Klancher, Nancy 94
 Klawans, Jonathan 308
 Klein, Ralph P. 203
 Knausgård, Karl Ove 223–228, 232, 235

- Knight, Douglas A. 185, 188 n. 12, 189, 196
 Knight, Mark 188 n. 13
 Knust, Jennifer 315
 Kolbert, Elizabeth 310
 Kolve, V. A. 50 n. 14
 Koosed, Jennifer L. 95, 96 n. 4
 Kothare, Jayant 191 n. 21
 Kotrosits, Maia 109, 151 n. 35, 315
 Kuan, Jeffrey Kah-Jin 282 n. 12
 Kügler, Joachim 241
 Kuloba, Robert W. 253
 Kurek-Chomycz, Dominika 279

 Lapsley, Jacqueline E. 125
 Larsen, Matthew D. 121
 Lazarus, Neil 156
 le Roux, Jurie H. 241
 Lee, Archie C. C. 156
 LeMarquand, Grant 241
 Leonard, Gary S. D. 258
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude 25
 Levine, Paul 5 n. 2
 Liew, Tat-siong Benny 68 n. 1, 93, 133 n. 1, 134
 n. 3, 136 n. 10, 149 n. 32
 Lim, Timothy H. 222 n. 12
 Lincoln, Bruce 82 n. 10
 Lin, Yii-Jan 1, 3–7, 10
 Loba-Mkole, Jean-Claude 240 n. 1, 241
 Locke, John 114
 Long, Burke O. 301
 Lopez, Davina C. 1–2, 4–7, 11
 Losurdo, Domenico 29
 Love, Heather 315
 Lozada, Francisco Jr. 150
 Lubbe, J. J. 244
 Lyons, William John 185 n. 8, 188 n. 13

 MacDonald, Dennis Ronald 228 n. 18
 MacDonald, Nathan 308
 Mack, Burton L. 134 n. 5
 Mafico, Temba L. J. 241
 Magaziner, Daniel R. 242
 Maier, Harry O. 146
 Malcolm, Matthew R. 187
 Malina, Bruce J. 277
 Maluleke, Tinyiko S. 240 n. 1, 241, 253, 262
 Mann, Charles C. 312
 Mann, Jacob 38

 Marchal, Joseph A. 99 n. 10, 100, 150
 Marin, Louis 277
 Markoe, Lauren 313
 Martin, Clarice J. 140 n. 20
 Martin, Dale B. 138 n. 17
 Martínez, Jessica 297
 Martin, Terry 29
 Martyn, J. Louis 276 n. 3
 Masenya, Madipoane 195 n. 28, 259
 Mbembe, Achille 157–158, 164–167, 243–246
 Mbiti, John 260
 Mbuvi, Andrew M. 240, 248
 Mbuwayesango, Dora Rudo 240 n. 1, 251,
 252
 McCarter, Kyle P. 200 n. 35
 McClure, Laura K. 141
 McElduff, Siobhán 231 n. 21
 McKay, Stan 191 n. 21
 McKinlay, Judith 194 n. 25
 McLean, Bradley H. 157, 158
 McLeod, John 166
 McNeill, John R. 305
 Merrill, Dennis 174
 Meyer, Stephen M. 310
 Michael, Matthew 199, 200
 Michie, Donald 277
 Míguez-Bonino, José 261
 Mill, John Stuart 29
 Mink, Gerd 122
 Mirguet, Françoise 279
 Miscall, Peter D. 277
 Mitchell, Margaret 201
 Mncube, Bernard Sr. 251
 Moffat, Robert 244–245
 Mofokeng, Takatso 254, 256, 262
 Momigliano, Arnaldo 85
 Montiglio, Sylvia 229 n. 19
 Mooney, Chris 297
 Moore, Jason W. 306
 Moore, Stephen D. 2–5, 10, 95, 96 nn. 4–5,
 121, 138 n. 17, 185 n. 8, 302–303, 310, 312
 Moraga, Cherrie L. 146
 Morgan, Thomas 64
 Morton, Timothy 305
 Morton, Victor 286 n. 20
 Mosala, Bernadette I. 251
 Mosala, Itumeleng J. 5, 249–250, 254–258,
 260

- Mroczek, Eva 221
 Mufson, Steven 297
 Mukeng, André Kabasele 240 n. 1
 Muñoz, José Esteban 144, 145 n. 27, 150
 Murray, Melanie A. 176
 Murray, Robert 58

 Nadar, Sarojini 251 n. 7
 Nanos, Mark D. 99
 Nayar, Pramod K. 290 n. 25
 Ndung'u, Nahashon W. 241
 Nelson, Alissa Jones 259 n. 14
 Newsom, Carol A. 125
 Ngwa, Kenneth N. 241
 Niedzwiecki, Hal 182
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 5 n. 2, 33, 314
 Niezen, Ronald 192
 Norris, Richard 16 n. 1, 17
 Nthamburi, Zablón 241
 Ntrel, Benjamin A. 241
 Ntsimane, Radikobo 254
 Nyirimana, Eraste 241
 Nzimande, Makhosazana K. 253

 Oduyoye, Mercy Amba 241
 Ogachi, Ibrahim Oanda 260
 Økland, Jorunn 1–3, 5–8
 Okure, Teresa 241, 251
 Olojede, Funlola 196 n. 29

 Pachirat, Timothy 309
 Page, Hugh R. Jr. 125
 Parmentier, M. F. G. 51 n. 15
 Parrat, John 241
 Pasquali, Giorgio 123
 Patte, Daniel 241 n. 2
 Peel, J. D. Y. 262
 Penner, Todd 137 n. 13
 Perdue, Leo G. 159
 Perrin, Norman 276 n. 3
 Peterson, Anna L. 307
 Petterson, Christina 22
 Phillips, Gary A. 277
 Phiri, Isabel A. 251 n. 7
 Pippin, Tina 139 n. 18
 Plaatjie, Gloria Kehilwe 251
 Plummer, Mark L. 312
 Porter, Stanley E. 112–113, 187

 Preus, J. Samuel 64, 216 n. 1
 Punt, Jeremy 241, 251, 253
 Pyper, Hugh S. 93, 226

 Quayson, Ato 158, 164–167
 Quinn, Daniel 9 n. 6

 Radhakrishnan, R. 160
 Ramírez Fernández, Dagoberto 140
 Reid, Melissa 11 n. 8
 Reinhartz, Adele 284 n. 18
 Reis, Pamela Tamarkin 204 n. 43
 Renju, Peter 241
 Rhoads, David 277, 279
 Richard, Pablo 140
 Ricoeur, Paul 4, 137, 314
 Ringe, Sharon H. 125
 Robinson, Peter 121
 Rodríguez, Juana María 148 n. 30
 Rogerson, John W. 80
 Rolston, Holmes III 311–312
 Romanos, le M 41, 49 n. 12, 52, 54–55, 61–62, 64
 Rose, Deborah Bird 311
 Rossing, Barbara R. 139 n. 18
 Rowland, Christopher 280
 Rowlett, Lori L. 278
 Royalty, Robert M. Jr. 141
 Rubenstein, Mary-Jane 279
 Ruiz, Jean-Pierre 147, 150
 Runions, Erin 143, 150, 182 n. 1, 209 n. 48, 298

 Sabar, Ariel 122
 Said, Edward W. 6, 260
 Saillard, Yves 22
 Salazar, Noel B. 174
 Samuel, Simon 9
 Sanneh, Lamin 245–246
 Schaaf, Ype 241
 Scherbenske, Eric 220
 Schleifer, Ronald 278
 Schneider, Joseph 298
 Schroeder, Caroline T. 116
 Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth 7 n. 4, 97–98, 141 n. 22, 277, 302
 Scott, Joan Wallach 86
 Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky 9, 137, 138 n. 16, 142–143, 152, 299, 314–315

- Segovia, Fernando F. 135, 150 n. 33, 157, 159,
186–188, 274 n. 1, 275–276, 282, 283 n. 14,
303–304, 311
- Seshadri-Crooks, Kalpana 156
- Shear, Michael D. 297
- Sheehan, Jonathan 287 n. 21
- Sheller, Mimi 175–176, 178
- Sherman, Mary Antoinette Brown 259
- Sherwood, Yvonne 1–3, 7, 11, 45 n. 9, 96 n. 5,
121, 310
- Sifuna, Daniel N. 259
- Silman, Janet 191 n. 21
- Simon, Stephanie 297
- Sithole, Nkosinathi 241
- Sitoto, Tahir F. 241
- Smit, Dirk J. 259
- Smith, Bruce D. 305
- Smith, Gregory A. 297
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 76 n. 7
- Smith, Morton 23
- Smith, Shanell T. 144–147
- Snyman, Gerrie F. 241
- Sowell, R. S. 116
- Speckman, McGlory T. 241
- Spencer Miller, Althea 195, 197
- Spinoza, Benedictus de 217 n. 3
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 157
- Stager, Lawrence 23 n. 4
- Staley, Jeffrey L. 278
- Stalin, Joseph 29
- Ste. Croix, G. E. M. de 21
- Steed, Christopher 244
- Steffen, Will 304, 305
- Steiner, George 33–35, 38, 42
- Stone, Ken 2–3, 8–11
- Stordalen, Terje 222 n. 12, 231 n. 20
- Storrie, Bridget 209 n. 48
- Strachan, Ian Gregory 174, 177–178
- Strauss, D. F. 117
- Streeter, Burnett Hillman 123
- Stroumsa, Guy G. 228 n. 18
- Sugirtharajah, R. S. 156, 159, 260–261, 282,
284, 286
- Sum, Ngai-Ling 22
- Sundkler, Bengt 244
- Sun, Lena H. 297
- Tamez, Elsa 261
- Taussig, Hal 279
- Terreblanche, Sampie 246
- Theime, John 162
- Thiselton, Anthony C. 187–188
- Thomas, Chris D. 312
- Thomas, Keith 315
- Thomas, Oral A. W. 282 n. 13
- Tolbert, Mary Ann 183 n. 3
- Torres, Sergio 241
- Tremonti, Anna Maria 184 n. 6
- Treat, James 194 n. 26
- Trible, Phyllis 18, 277
- Trinh, T. Min-ha 161
- Truth, Sojourner 236
- Tucker, Gene M. 185, 188 n. 12, 189, 196
- Turman, Eboni Marshall 145
- Twomey, Jay 1–5, 11
- Uhlenbruch, Frauke 298
- Ukpong, Justin S. 242–243, 246, 248–249,
280, 281
- Underwood, Ted 103, 109
- Vaage, Leif E. 240
- Vaka'uta, Nasili 197 n. 32
- Vale, Peter 260
- van der Tuin, Iris 279
- van der Walt, Charlene 241, 253
- Vander Stichele, Caroline 137 n. 13
- Van Dooren, Thom 310
- van Eysinga, Gustaaf Adolf Bergh 84
- Villanueva, Rico 281
- Vizenor, Gerald 206 n. 46
- Vosloo, Robert 246
- Wachtel, Klaus 123
- Wafawanaka, Robert 241
- Wafula, Robert 241 n. 2
- Walcott, Derek 3, 6–8, 9 n. 6, 10, 158, 161–165,
167–179
- Waliggo, John M. 240 n. 1
- Wallerstein, Immanuel 26
- Walsh, Richard 100–101
- Warrior, Robert Allen 193–194, 196 n. 31, 208
- Waruta, Douglas 241

- Weaver, Jace 194 n. 26, 208
Weems, Renita J. 261, 277
Weis, Tony 309
Wendland, Ernst R. 240 n. 1
West, Gerald O. 1–8, 9 n. 6, 11, 160
West, Mona 278
Westcott, Brooke Foss 117
White, Hayden 86
Whiteside, Alan 253
Wile, Rob 128
Williamson, H. G. M. 185, 189
Wimbush, Vincent L. 135–136, 149
Wolin, Richard 5 n. 3
Woolf, Greg 69 n. 2
Woolford, Andrew 190 n. 18
Woolf, Rosemary 61 n. 22
Wurst, Shirley 278
Yafeh-Deigh, Alice Y. 251
Yamauchi, Edwin M. 241
Yee, Gale A. 19
Yeo, Khiok-khng 98–100
Yorke, Gosnell L. 240–241
Young, Robert J. C. 156
Yri, Kjell Magne 222 n. 11
Zabus, Chantal 156
Zachhuber, Johannes 217
Zalasiewicz, Jan 305
Zeder, Melinda A. 305
Zeldes, Amir 116
Zinkurature, Victor 240 n. 1